"First Ever Selfie Cover!": *Cosmopolitan* Magazine, Influencers, and the Mainstreaming of Selfie Style

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical analysis of a single image: the recently published "first ever selfie cover" of *Cosmopolitan* magazine (the South African edition) published in March 2019. The image features three South African "influencers", and was purportedly taken by the women themselves, using a remote shutter release attached to a cable. In examining the image that was included on the cover, I make an argument about both its aesthetics and politics. In terms of the former, I examine the production values and composition of the image and consider how it relates to selfie style as understood in scholarship so far. In terms of the latter, I consider the extent to which the naming of the image as a selfie intersects with claims made about the genre's capacity to empower and reshape oppressive visual culture. I argue that this case study shows how the selfie has been appropriated into mainstream commercial visual culture. This case study is situated within relevant scholarship to do with the consumer magazine and selfies, before the image in question was introduced and contextualised. Finally, the chapter develops an analytical argument about the aesthetics and politics of the commercial appropriation of selfie imagery.

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to reflect on some of the ways in which selfie culture has become mainstreamed and appropriated by powerful commercial institutions that both construct and profit from particular narratives of consumption and aspiration, such as women's magazines. Specifically, I examine a particular case study, the so-called "first ever selfie cover" of the South African edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which was published in February 2019. In examining the image that was included on the cover, I make an argument about both its aesthetics and politics. In terms of the former, I examine the production values and design of the image and consider how it relates to selfie style as understood in scholarship so far. In terms of the latter, I consider the extent to which the naming of the image as a selfie intersects with claims made about genre's capacity to empower and reshape oppressive visual culture. This chapter is structured as follows: first, I situate this case study within relevant scholarship to do with the consumer magazine and selfies; second, I introduce the image in question and discuss its composition and dissemination; third, I develop an

analytical argument about the aesthetics and politics of the commercial appropriation of selfie imagery.

2. *Cosmopolitan* Magazine, Glossy Covers, and Selfies

A huge amount of research has been done on magazines, and a detailed discussion of this is outside of the scope of this paper (though refer to Iqani (2012b) for an indicative summary of classic literature on the genre, as well as Rooks et al. (2016) for a sense of new emerging scholarship on magazines). In terms of work specific to the *Cosmopolitan* brand, a similar wealth of scholarship is evident, which is worth briefly touching upon. The history of the magazine has been written, with its roots in the White feminism of the 1960s and how this was embodied in the life and career of the *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley-Brown (Hauser 2016; Scanlon 2010) and its links to the rise of feminised consumer culture has also received attention (Landers 2010) and, of course, critique from feminist scholars (McCracken 1982, 1993). The extent to which the "fun fearless female" discourse is globalised (and localised) in various national editions of the magazine has been articulated (Machin and van Leeuwen 2005; Machin and Thornborrow 2003; Machin and van Leeuwen 2003). How the magazine intersected with traditional culture in Taiwan has been explored (Chang 2004), how its advertising content in various national editions differs in terms of its sexuality (Nelson and Paek 2005) and in terms of strategies and tactics (Nelson and Paek 2007) has been compared. The racial dynamics of representation in the magazine has been considered, with scholars making arguments about the ways in which whiteness is prioritised in various national editions of the magazine, for example, Indonesia (Saraswati 2010). How the magazine gives relationship advice has been studied (Gupta et al. 2008; Gill 2009), how it narrates women's sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s has been analysed (McMahon 1990), that the poses and postures adopted by the women featured in the magazine are similar to those shown in *Playboy* has been demonstrated (Krassas et al. 2001), and how it reproduces the deterministic sociobiological narratives of gender has been articulated (Hasinoff 2009; Saraceno and Tambling 2013). In addition, how audiences read and interpret the magazine has been explored (McCleneghan 2003; Donnelly 2008).

Alongside this breadth of research on *Cosmopolitan* magazine, some key perspectives on the cover as genre are worth considering in a little more depth, as context. As Caroline Kitch has noted, the "girl on the magazine cover" has a long legacy (Kitch 2001), and magazines have played a key role in constructing gendered stereotypes of women in American culture. Furthermore, as I have written about at some length, cover imagery on consumer magazines plays a key role in constructing and disseminating the core values of neoliberal consumer culture in the West, including individualised narratives of commodity acquisition, sexiness, and consumer self-hood (Iqani 2012b; McCracken 1993). Close-up portraits of the

faces of famous people or models on the covers of women's magazines can function as key resources in individual identity projects, signalled through the invitation to imagine the self, encoded in the intimate eye-contact of almost life-size portraits (Iqani 2012b, pp. 140–58). The texture and sensibility of glossiness on the magazine cover plays a key role in the creation of the idea of celebrity as well as the general desirability of mass market commodities (Iqani 2012b, pp. 82–102). Women's bodies and cars are similarly represented on the covers of men's magazines, in such a way that the smoothness of both types of bodywork contributes to a process of commodification (Iqani 2012a). These perspectives on the discursive work done by magazine covers shows that it can be theorised as one of the key sites in the consumer media economy. In many ways, the magazine cover stands in synecdoche for the entire media economy of consumer culture: it is at once an advert (for the magazine content itself, for the celebrity brands featured, for the commodities worn by the cover stars) and a site through which media owners sell the attention of their audiences on to advertisers. As an iconic genre of commercial media, the magazine cover remains relatively influential in popular culture, despite the rise of interactive digital media platforms. Indeed, recent research has shown that readers remain attracted to the glossy aesthetic of the magazine (Webb and Fulton 2019).

In the past ten years, social media sites have arguably become equally powerful sites for the communication of consumer values, practices, and identities. YouTube remains one of the most prolific and popular platforms through which young people can create and share content, often through video blogs or 'vlogs' in which a selfie-style of filming is central (Burgess and Green 2018). Instagram could be seen as the new "magazine" due to its unparalleled ability to curate and disseminate visual content and, indeed, it has been favoured as a platform for those who work in and consume fashion, art, and other forms of creative expression (Lee et al. 2015). Instagram is one of the most widely used social media platforms. At the time of writing, the platform claimed to have 1 billion active users. It is used not only by individuals sharing visual narratives of their lives, but by advertisers and corporations who use it as a platform for communicating their brands (Chen 2018). One of the key features of the rise of digital media and the broad uptake of social media platforms by so many is the rise of the selfie. One of the key uses to which social media are put is self-expression, and this often takes the form of literal imaging of the self: the selfie (Murray 2015). This can serve as a route to a new form of celebritydom, being "instafamous" (Marwick 2015). Selfie culture is, to an extent, produced by celebrities, for example, Kim Kardashian, who became famous partly through her prolific and sexy self-representation on social media (McClain 2013). Celebrities regularly share glamorous selfies as a mode of keeping an intimate sense of connection alive with their fans (Iqani 2016, pp. 160–92). An argument could be made that many selfies imitate the kind of glamorous portraiture seen on magazine covers, especially in

the highly stylised sexy selfies that young women (cis and trans) often create and share online.

The rise of selfie culture has been documented, in depth, by a blooming field of critical visual studies and media studies. Purportedly a photograph of a person taken by that person using a mobile smartphone, laptop computer, or another digital device, the selfie must be understood as both an object and practice, that is both a commodity form and a consumer practice (Iqani and Schroeder 2016). In terms of the former, the selfie needs to be seen as a thing that has a genealogy, linking it to other forms of everyday visual culture, such as the snapshot (Schroeder 2013). In terms of the latter, the selfie is a particular genre of visual communication that signals the participation of ordinary people in mainstream visual culture. Some scholars have argued that the selfie should be understood as an emancipatory form of communication, in that the person who is featured in the images is in charge of the framing, taking, and disseminating of that image. Indeed, selfies are being used by several marginalised groups to make statements about belonging and being (Frosh 2015; Nemer and Freeman 2015), including for example trans and queer individuals (Vivienne 2017) and refugees (Chouliaraki 2017). Arguably, the selfie can be understood neither as purely empowering nor as evidence of wholesale buy in to consumer culture (Kedzior and Allen 2016). With many scholars contributing to the debate on the moral positionality of the selfie within popular culture (Senft and Baym 2015; Thumim 2017; Cruz and Thornham 2015; Kuntsman 2017), what remains clear is that selfies have become an increasingly less controversial aspect of digital culture and consumer culture. Indeed, the question arises as to whether the selfie has become so "everyday" that it has been mainstreamed onto the cover of a magazine.

3. *Cosmopolitan*'s "First Ever Selfie Cover"

The US edition of *Cosmopolitan* was first published in 1886 (Landers 2010, p. vii), and once revived by the vision of Helen Gurley Brown in the 1960s (Hauser 2016), quickly went on to become a global media brand. In South Africa, the title is published by Associated Magazines, owned and managed by the powerful Raphaely family. The South African edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine has been published since 1984 (Donnelly 2001, p. 5) and, true to the global brand values of "fun fearless female", has consistently produced content that speaks to the perceived interests of its target market: sex, fashion, careers, relationships, and beauty. In its advertising rate card, *Cosmopolitan* South Africa claims a total audience of 1.9 million, and a combined social media following of 975,000. In 2017, it appointed, arguably, its first

ever millennial editor, Holly Meadows, a young White woman[1] with a degree from the University of Cape Town, who stated that her aim was to take the title "into the future" and integrate a digital sensibility into its brand positioning and content (Tennant 2017). One of the innovations that Meadows introduced was an issue dedicated to "influencers" and the first "influencer" edition was published in March 2018, featuring studio portraits of three chosen Instagram influencers, with customers able to choose a magazine featuring their favourite of the three. In 2019, the magazine published its second "influencer" issue in partnership with YouTube. According to the press release announcing this "historic" magazine edition, the cover features a selfie, a first for the brand: "On the magazine's March 2019 cover are local influencers Mihlali Ndamase, Nadia Jaftha and Jessica Van Heerden. *Cosmopolitan* editor Holly Meadows said she chose the three influencers because they are the most recognisable female talents on YouTube right now" (Associated Magazines 2019). The cover is framed as a collaboration between YouTube and *Cosmopolitan*. To give some sense of each of the influencer's reach, their followings on key social media platforms (at the time of writing) are summarised in Table 1. All three young women are notable in that they have gained fame and recognition through their creation of social media content, usually oriented around their social lives and consumption of commodities, such as fashion, make-up, hair treatments (which have historically been stereotyped as female and feminine but which are increasingly appealing to a broader spectrum of masculine, non-binary, and queer consumers). In a previous generation, they may have been termed "glamour models" or "socialites", but due to their social media presence, they are known as "influencers" in millennial culture.

Table 1. The social media reach of the three influencer cover models.

Influencer	Known For	YouTube	Instagram	Twitter
Mihlali Ndamase	Beauty, Lifestyle	170,000	773,000	196,000
Nadia Jaftha	Pranks, Beauty, Music	37,000	323,000	16,500
Jessica Van Heerden	Beauty, Lifestyle	38,800	23,600	700

There is an emerging literature on influencers, with some key observations being made about the links between them and brand management (Booth and Matic 2011; Burns 2016; Uzunoğlu and Kip 2014; Veirman et al. 2017), cultural labour and value creation (Abidin 2017; Iqani 2019; Khamis et al. 2017), and gender (Abidin 2016). Some important writing has also mapped out the relationship

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[1] Only a handful of Black women have been appointed as editor of *Cosmopolitan* South Africa, with Sbu Mpungose only serving nine months in the role in 2012 (as reported in Sowetan Live, 17 September 2012).

between young women and content creation on YouTube (Banet-Weiser 2017, 2012; Duffy 2017; Duffy and Hund 2015; Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017). As the image in question in this chapter shows, YouTube remains a key site through which millennial self-expression is operationalised. The public profiles of three of the women featured on the *Cosmopolitan* cover can be understood in relation to this literature, as all three have strong followings on YouTube and Instagram (though rather strangely, while Ndamase and Jaftha have strong Twitter followings, Van Heerden does not).

The cover image (see Figure 1) shows the three influencers clustered around a small white cube, with Ndamase in the centre, holding a remote shutter release attached to a cable. Ndamase leans forward with her hand on the cube, and the two other women, Jaftha and Van Heerden, are positioned slightly behind her, each holding up a hand with the palm facing the camera. All three are dressed in trendy, bold streetwear: Van Heerden in a houndstooth miniskirt and jacket with a bikini top underneath, Ndamase in an orange sports jacket and huge hoop earrings, and Jaftha in a gold lamé shirt and chequered trilby. While Ndamase grins delightedly, Van Heerden narrows her eyes and grimaces in punk style, and Jaftha scowls glamorously. All three influencers released the same image on their Instagram profiles simultaneously, presumably timed with the magazine's availability in stores, featuring slightly differently worded captions in which all enthuse about their honour at being featured on the cover alongside the other two, expressing their gratitude for the recognition and collaboration, and tagging the *Cosmopolitan* SA Instagram handle and the other two women.

Figure 1. A screenshot from the Instagram profile of one of the influencers featured in the selfie cover, Mihlali Ndamase.

In terms of the composition of the image, the only thing that suggests that it is a selfie is the presence of the remote shutter release. In photography, there are multiple technologies available for taking self-portraits, including timer settings that delay the shutter release, wireless remote shutter releases that can be easily hidden by the self-portrait photographer, and even, more recently, digital cameras with sensor technologies that recognise hand gestures (Chu and Tanaka 2011). It is, therefore, significant that the team that assembled the cover selfie chose to use a cabled shutter release device. What the cable and the device in Ndamase's hand signifies is that it was she who made the decision about when to take the photograph, that she pushed the button, so to speak. Whether or not the cable and shutter release device were simply props or were actually deployed by Ndamase as indicated in the image is not clear from any of the promotional material shared about the image. This agency—being both the subject of the photograph and the person who takes it—is at the heart of how selfies have been defined in critical cultural studies. And it is this agency that *Cosmo* accentuates in its promotional write up about the cover, that the "YouTube stars" are "taking (and calling) the shots, literally and figuratively" (Marcopolous 2019). But the *Cosmo* selfie, aside perhaps from the general sense of

youthful fashionability and trendy defiance communicated in the postures, gestures, expressions, and outfits of the three influencers, carries few other indications of the selfie genre as it has been understood in the scholarship. Selfies have been largely defined as low-fi images, taken on smartphones or handheld devices in the flow of everyday life, and sharing a certain texture of the ordinary. For example, many selfies are taken in mirrors in bathrooms or even while seated on the toilet (hardly glamorous locations), on public transport, in the home after putting on make-up, or on social occasions with friends. By contrast, the *Cosmo* selfie is clearly taken in a studio setting, with a professional backdrop and lighting, and with professional stylists and make-up artists. In a "behind the scenes" YouTube video posted by van Heerden, the professional photography studio setup is documented, as well as the team of experts present. The *Cosmopolitan* image seems to be suggesting that the only thing that makes a selfie a selfie is that the person in the image is the one that pressed the shutter release, and that the inclusion of highly professional settings and strategies does not change this. As well as having been professionally produced, the image tells a story about how the discourse and aesthetic of the selfie has come to take on new meanings, other than those already identified in the literature. It is to this thematic that I turn next.

4. The Design of the Influencer Cover Selfie

In true magazine cover style, the cover selfie is very glossy and glamorous. The three women in the *Cosmo* self-portrait are immaculately dressed and styled. They are wearing the latest fashions, each has carefully styled hair and perfect make-up, including conspicuous manicures. The textures of their clothes, skin, and hair communicate youth and stereotypical feminine beauty. We can see the texture of glossiness in operation in the magazine cover. Magazine covers are smooth, glossy objects; so too are the subjects featured on them. Of course, by virtue of having their images placed on the magazine cover, the message is that they are celebrities. The tagline "the influencer issue" boldly states the reason for their treatment as celebrities: by virtue of having achieved instafame, they are now being validated in the iconic media genre that signals celebrity status: the magazine cover. As such, the message is clear: being an influencer is a direct route to becoming a celebrity. A callout bubble promises that a feature inside the magazine will teach readers "how to make bank on insta"; that is, how to monetise social media profiles and become effective, and well-paid, online influencers. Interestingly, the text and image combine to create a new message about celebrity, as well as how both traditional and digital media interact in the project of celebritisation. Here, we see the magazine cover operating as a space in which consumer subjecthood is produced and validated. Successful self-promotion on social media can lead to mainstream validation on magazines, in television, and so on. While this route to visibility might promise to

give marginalised people an equal chance at recognition (and the income that comes with it), in this specific image, we see instead neoliberal consumer culture succeeding in reproducing its values in multiple media sectors. While, on the one hand, the selfie is an organic media form, built by ordinary people from the ground up and used to stake a claim of being and belonging in visual culture, the self-portrait has also been a tool used by elites to communicate power. Indeed, in the rise of the selfie itself, commercial strategies and consumerist aesthetics have played a central role (consider the rise of Kim Kardashian, her fame almost entirely produced through sexy, glossy, self-representation online) (Kardashian West 2015). While some selfies are snapshots, in the everyday sense, especially in celebrity culture, selfies also play a central role in producing the glossy, glamorous aesthetic that communicates fame. Indeed, many "ordinary" women use various types of selfies to try to construct a glossy, glamorous, and hyperfeminine sensibility in their own personal social media narratives (Marwick 2015).

That the cover photograph features three women is key. As South Africa is a multicultural society with a history of racial oppression, the racial make-up of the three women is important to note. Ndamase is Black African, Jaftha is Indian (in South Africa, a designation categorising citizens of South Asian descent), and Van Heerden is White. The "diversity" of the image more or less ends there, as all three women are young, feminine, beautiful, and slim. Notably, the lighting and postproduction of the image brings a very similar resonance to the skin tones of all three women. Jaftha and Van Heerden both wear their hair blonde and straight, though in different lengths, and Ndamase wears a long curly weave, scraped back from her face into a voluptuous ponytail. The choice of outfits is not typically heteronormative or hyperfeminine, with Jaftha's hat introducing a mildly androgynous feel, and Ndamase's tight shorts, sports bra, and gold hoop earrings suggesting an inner-city sporty atmosphere. Precisely because they are not wearing ballgowns or cocktail dresses, as is often the case on *Cosmo*, the three come across as youthful, hip, and irreverent, which represents online youth culture.

The typical aesthetic for the *Cosmopolitan* cover is of a single celebrity or model, usually cropped in a very similar way, at the hips or thigh and crown of the head, wearing a "sexy", revealing outfit, glamorously styled, and gazing out at the viewer making direct eye contact. Breaking with this tradition, the "selfie cover" features three woman in a carefully arranged group portrait. This mimics one of the key subgenres of the selfie—the group selfie, when one person in a group of friends uses the selfie function to capture everyone together, either simply with the arm outstretched or using a selfie-stick. As Jonathan Schroeder has argued, the use of group portraiture in commercial communication has a long history, stretching from the Dutch masters through to portraits of the community of creatives in Andy Warhol's factory (Schroeder 2008). In group portraits, the positioning of each subject

is key, and usually carefully orchestrated to say something about their social standing and relationships to the others. Consider the famous group selfie of Ellen DeGeneres at the Oscars in 2014 (Kedzior et al. 2016), and how it displayed the links between that year's A-list performers. As the most "powerful" influencer, in terms of the numbers of her followings on her various social media platforms, Ndamase is placed in the middle of the image and leans into its foreground and, crucially, is given the power (be it symbolic or actual) of taking the image through the shutter control. The other two influencers, in keeping with their slightly more modest reaches, are set slightly back from Ndamase, and through their hand gestures, collaborate in framing the shot. The effect is something like a portrait of a pop band, with the sense that Ndamase is the lead singer and Van Heerden and Jaftha the back-up singers. The message sent here is that in the project of monetising influence, numbers matter more than anything, and it is because of her superior reach to audiences that Ndamase is "in charge" of this image. It is nevertheless crucial that Ndamase is not featured singly in the cover image (as was the choice with the 2018 influencers featured), but that the three influencers share the space. This communicates something about the collaborative and community aspects of social media, that influence and reach is built through tangible networks, both the technological networks of the internet that span the globe and the devices that connect, and the human networks of aspiration, status, and taste that connect people socially. These connections are hinted at by choice of a group portrait for the cover selfie and is echoed in the complimentary comments that each of the influencers wrote when posting the cover image. In this context, the critique of narcissism that is often levelled against selfies, especially when taken by young women, falls a bit flat, because of the support and camaraderie being portrayed in the group image and the ways in which it was shared by all the women in the image.

While the three influencers are "celebritised" by the cover, that is, validated as having sufficient fame, recognition, and beauty to be featured on the cover of one of the most popular magazines in the country, they too serve to validate the magazine's brand. In service of the goal of making the brand more digitally relevant and reaching an audience of young millennial readers, digital natives, it is increasingly urgent that mainstream media brands, especially those that were born in a pre-digital age, situate themselves as relevant to that audience. Drawing on the vernacular of the selfie, taking it for granted as something that young women and groups of friends do with their smartphones, possibly every day, *Cosmopolitan* is not only validating selfie culture but telling young women that the brand understands them and can speak for them. As such, there is a kind of branded symbiosis taking place in the image, not only between *Cosmopolitan* and YouTube, who collaborated on the "influencer" issue, but also between the individual brands of each "influencer" and the established media companies. Through the selfie cover, the brand of the magazine and the brands of the influencers are collaborating to promote one another on their

respective platforms—the three young women offer *Cosmopolitan* exposure to their followers, and *Cosmopolitan* offers them exposure to their readers, helping both to build their followings and reach. Considering how classic media economics operates, the attention of audiences is the only really monetizable asset that any media brand can own.

5. The Politics of the Commercial Appropriation of the Selfie

By naming the image on the cover as a "selfie" in its promotional material, *Cosmopolitan* is explicitly signifying that it handed over representational power to the women in the picture. It is worth considering how much control the three women had over the image. As consummate self-representors, it would be amiss to assume that they were completely controlled by the magazine's production team. This said, it would be equally amiss to assume that they were fully in charge of every aspect of the image. The collaborative aspect of the image, that it was produced together by the influencers and the magazine, signalled by the handheld remote shutter release, suggests that there might have been an equal play of decision making between both the subjects of the image and its producers. This particular selfie signals a wholesale buy-in to the commercial power of mainstream media and celebrity culture. It also represents the extent to which the taking of a selfie can be monetised and commoditised. In setting up the image, *Cosmopolitan* is producing what I will term a "professional selfie". A professional selfie can be understood to be a hybrid of the generic components of online, everyday visual self-expression and studio photography, and that seeks to mobilise the most powerful communicative aspects of each: the claim to authenticity of the former, and the glossy glamour of the latter. Of course, I am not suggesting that the image discussed in this paper is the first iteration of a professional selfie; I am simply using it to help delineate a new terminology for understanding the intersections of commercial culture and selfie aesthetics.

It would be incorrect to assume that the commercial application of the selfie, that is, putting one on the cover of a magazine, is a radical departure from selfie culture. Jonathan Schroeder has written about how the snapshot aesthetic has been appropriated by advertising that seeks to communicate a brand's sense of authenticity (Schroeder 2013); the same dynamic is arguably at play here. Selfies are more than snapshots that feature a moment in a person's life, they are also pieces of communication that, to an extent, build identity in personal brands. Many scholars have written about how the notion of self-branding is becoming central to the practices that young people undertake online (Gandini 2016; Khamis et al. 2017; Banet-Weiser 2012). From this perspective, the selfie is not a form of popular culture that has been appropriated by the powers of commerce, but it is a form of commercial imagery in its own right, and has been for some time, as Kim Kardashian has shown.

Of course, this perspective is rooted in a very neoliberal conception of the self: as a sign of both identity and income, as well as a sign of both personal brand and profitability. These values have arguably become intensified in recent years, and with the rise of digital media, the forms of self-presentation that take place online are increasingly being linked to ideas about career prospects, marketability, and success (Dutta 2010). The image under discussion in this paper sums up, in some ways, the neoliberal narrative about success and how it is produced through individualised online self-representation. The three influencers featured had, long before the opportunity to model on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine came along, decided to share stories and images about themselves online and find ways to monetise those narratives. As such, they are, in a sense, uber-successful neoliberal subjects who have cleverly and strategically used the opportunities presented by digital media platforms to forge media careers for themselves. Being on the *Cosmo* cover is a signal of them having "arrived", having succeeded in their content creation work and, thereby, having gained wide recognition. They already sold themselves through their personal social media platforms and video blogs and, arguably, there is little difference between that and selling themselves on the cover of a magazine. As their effusive commentary on their Instagram posts of the cover reveals, all three consider the opportunity empowering. They say: "blessings on blessings" (Ndamase), "I'm so proud, what a privilege" (Jaftha), and "so proud WOW" (Van Heerden).

Of course, it is important to not read too much into the success and agency, both individual and collective, claimed by the image. As many writers critiquing post-feminist culture have articulated (Dosekun 2020; Gill 2007, 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011), while claims to consumer self-hood and individualistic achievement are prioritised by neoliberal culture, the extent to which women are truly liberated (be it economically or socially) by an inherently patriarchal economic system requires ongoing critique, especially when that so-called empowerment looks very similar to what used to be considered oppression (for example, when women are validated only when they have money, show their bodies, and act sexually permissive). While Ndamase, van Heerden, and Jaftha are all performing a particular narrative of personal success, materialistic beauty, and economic freedom in their group self-portrait, they also conform to many of the limiting narratives about those things that serve the power structures of consumer culture. While on the one hand, they are narrating how they achieved fame by being their authentic selves and gained a following through choosing when and how to represent their stories, lives, and personalities, on the other hand, an argument can be made that they were precisely successful at this project because they already conformed, to a significant extent, to a pre-determined idea of what a young, successful (cishet) woman looks like and how she acts. There is a deeply circular logic at play. *Cosmopolitan* chose these three influencers to be on their cover because, as the editor said, they have achieved

recognition on YouTube. However, the kind of recognition that they have produced for themselves already fits very much with the *Cosmopolitan* brand image: a cursory look at the vlogs and Instagram profiles of each woman reveals a strong focus on make-up, clothing, socialising, parties, the easy, sexy display of their bodies, a strong orientation towards wealth as a life goal, and an unquestioned acceptance of heteronormative popular culture. These strategies fit directly with the *Cosmopolitan* brand of being fun and fearless, sexy and successful, career-oriented, and confident. What came first, the *Cosmopolitan* post-feminist brand, or the influencers performance of the same values in their own personal brands? It is possible that the aspiring influencers, in forging their online personae and crafting their content, took reference from the many existing powerful consumerist and post-feminist discourses available in mainstream media culture, including of course, the influential *Cosmopolitan* brand.

Although it might be tempting to write the image off as yet another example of the exploitation of women by patriarchal culture through the performance of self-internalised forms of body work, management, and beauty required by consumer culture in order to be considered fierce, fun, and fearless (a *Cosmo* girl, in charge of her career, her body, and her looks, but still sexy, pleasing to the heteronormative gaze, and a wholesale champion of market exchange), it is nevertheless important to take seriously the ways in which the three influencers have been able to exercise their agency. These can be read off the image in the collaborative sense of their playful participation in creating it together, as well as in their confident, even irreverent expressions, gestures, and postures. While they clearly had some say in their image (perhaps more than any cover model before them), they also were controlled by the styling, lighting, and postproduction processes that were implemented by the magazine itself, as well as by the discursive strategies of the *Cosmopolitan* brand.

All of this said, however, and no matter how lucrative being an influencer and making online content has been for each woman featured in the selfie cover, their particular financial and cultural empowerment needs to be considered in the bigger picture of the media economy. Powerful corporate media brands like *Cosmopolitan* magazine have a great deal more power and influence than aspiring video bloggers—at least for the time being. While there may emerge exceptions in the future—for example, should one of the influencers supersede the *Cosmopolitan* reach in their personal viewership and do a better job than *Cosmo* at creating content that young viewers and readers want to consume—for now, it is still the big media companies and brands to which the influencers aspire to gain access and validation. It is *Cosmopolitan* that, for now, has the greater reach in terms of audience and greater resources to maintain, and communicate with, that audience.

This chapter has shown how, through innovative partnerships across the online and offline realms, and between formal media institutions and self-made media entrepreneurs, the selfie has been mainstreamed into commercial magazine culture,

creating a new genre, the "professional selfie". These can be used to build the brands of all parties involved, by reaching out to a millennial audience using its own vernacular. Although the selfie has been mainstreamed and professionalised, it is a very specific version of the selfie (both in content and form) that has achieved this crossover. By deploying strategies of glossiness and a post-feminist sensibility, the *Cosmo* selfie cover functions more like a magazine cover and less like a selfie, regardless of the fact that the person who pushed the shutter button was in the centre of the image. As such, future critical thinking about selfies will need to accommodate new ways of understanding how this mode of communication can be commoditised and appropriated by profit-oriented media actors.

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