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<p style="text-align:center">Critical Film Analysis: Fake Famous</p>

Social media influencers seem to proliferate in every corner of the internet now. There are

lifestyle influencers, beauty influencers, home renovation influencers, and everything in

between. The HBO documentary *Fake Famous* seeks to uncover the current nature and trends

behind influencers, and whether they can be manufactured through buying "bots" (fake

followers) and simulating the extravagant lifestyle that other "real" influencers seemingly have.

The documentary follows the journeys of struggling actress Dominique Druckman, real-estate

professional and assistant Wylie Heiner, and fashion designer and entrepreneur Chris Bailey as

they seek to become "famous" and successful Instagram influencers with the help of writer and

director Nick Bilton. In the contemporary era, especially in a time of racial reckoning and a

widespread awakening to the fact that those who have been afforded success and dominance in

various industries are predominantly white, it becomes especially pertinent to examine the role of

white, heterosexual, upper-class women in the social media influencer space — as digital

entertainment continues to grow, it is especially important to start exploring racist hierarchies in

social media spaces. In this paper, I seek to answer the following: To what extent does *Fake*

Famous portray the ways white women proliferate the social media influencer space, and what

are the ensuing consequences and effects? I will explore how the film portrays but doesn't

critically investigate how white women, in particular, rise to fame and dominate the influencer

space — Dominique is a white woman, Wylie is a white man, and Chris is a Black man. I will do

this by examining how the film follows Dominique's journey in a much more detailed manner

than the other two subjects, and how the film frames the various nuances of the influencer landscape by predominantly focusing on white women. I will also draw from existing scholarship to argue how the film perpetuates the existing white, cisgender, heteronormative space of Instagram influencers without challenging or even directly addressing this directly or thoroughly. I will be connecting these theories and ideas to my discussion, analysis, and arguments surrounding this film. I will primarily be drawing on the works of Brooke Erin Duffy, Rachel O'Neill, Sarah Banet - Weiser, and Mariah L. Wellman.

The saturation of white women in the influencer space is well known, but the ramifications of this saturation, and a lack of discussion surrounding it, are harmful. In her article "Pursuing 'Wellness': Considerations for Media Studies", O'Neill discusses white women influencers in the wellness space specifically, drawing on interviews she's conducted with women of color heavily involved or interested in wellness to argue that despite the perception of wellness as exclusive to white women as a result of their saturation in the influencer market, it's an interest and necessity to women of color and wider demographics as well (O'Neill, 2020). She specifically argues that not discussing the saturation of white women influencers only perpetuates white feminism and its harmful effects. O'Neill cites Sara Ahmed and Jessie Daniels when stating that "Wellness has become a white space because white bodies take up the space it makes available; what is more, these bodies are extended by the space, making it difficult for women such as Asmaa to even gain entry. To this extent, it functions as an ancillary to prevailing formations of white feminism, where expanded opportunities for women so often entail restrictions for people of color (Daniels 2016)" — white feminism in this context refers to the ways that white women utilize their whiteness to oppress women of color under the guise of feminism and diversity (O'Neill, 2020). She interviews people like Asmaa, a personal trainer and

Black woman passionate about the importance of wellness for Black women specifically. "For Asmaa, it is self-evident that the whiteness of wellness is not something that just is, but rather something that is cultivated through more or less willful exclusions" (O'Neill, 2020) — white women influencers in the wellness space refuse to confront their whiteness and hide behind their oppression as women, and thus the cycle of erasure continues. This article specifically focuses on wellness influencers, but the arguments about the ways that whiteness is upheld and even becomes synonymous with various lifestyles influencers portray without a lack of critique or discussion can be generalized to the ways that *Fake Famous* perpetuates white feminism through a lack of discussion or even examination of race. Duffy supports the discussion of a plethora of white women influencers in her article "Gendering the Labor of Social Media Production", primarily arguing how women, in general, are rarely respected or fairly compensated for their labor on social media, influencers of color even less so, even as social media is lauded for being an industry pioneering equality and diversity of talent (Duffy, 2015). She states that "Based upon my research of young women who understand social media as platforms for 'getting discovered,' I have found that the few who effectively translate their passions into full-time careers enjoy a relatively privileged position; they tend to be white, middle class, well-educated, and typify conventional beauty standards. Such conclusions mark a rupture with techno-utopian celebrations of digital equality by shedding light on the raced and classed nature of social media labor" (Duffy, 2015).

Banet-Weiser expands on O'Neill's arguments, investigating the roles that race and gender play in the labour of social media influencers in her article "Gender, Social Media, and the Labor of Authenticity"; she specifically discusses how white women have been the most "successful" (widely accepted and rich) as influencers because of their pre-existing systemic privileges as

well as their ability to manufacture "authenticity" defined by whiteness (Banet-Weiser, 2021).
She takes O'Neill's argument one step further by stating that "The role of professional influencer
has been particularly profitable for women (especially white, cis-gendered women), but this
success is dependent on a particular curation of the self, one enhanced by technology….. we also
see this in the heightened visibility on social media of young women who construct online selves
that are pointedly "not real," using fake accounts, fake sponsorships, deepfakes, and so on. Thus,
making oneself more "authentic" means, paradoxically, conforming one's visual representation
to dominant white beauty norms" (Banet-Weiser, 2021). Wellman builds on Duffy's points of the
labor of influencers and also echoes O'Neills by focusing on how influencers built an image of
"authenticity" during the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement and social reckoning. She argues
how the summer of 2020 was the first time that white women influencers ever had to think about
their own privilege and the ways they uphold or perpetuate systemic racism — this sense of
authenticity also seems to be manufactured and could also be seen as "performative activism" or
activism that is only conducted out of self-interest and maintaining self image (Wellman 2022). I
will be exploring how *Fake Famous* perpetuates (not only simulates) manufactured authenticity
through Domonique as a white woman social media influencer.

The film starts with a montage of various young people posing in front of the iconic Paul Smith
pink wall in LA, trying to take the perfect picture for Instagram (context is provided through the
voiceover). There's diversity in who's featured in the montage, but the first woman shown is
white — this in itself is representative of what's to come, with white women being the forefront
or the leading image carrying throughout the documentary. At 13:32 of the documentary, the
director and conductor of this social experiment Nick Bilton discusses the goals of this project:
to uncover the nature of and "vast, unintended consequences of influencers on [social media

platforms]" (Bilton 2021). The film's lack of discussion surrounding race, and specifically

research like Duffy's that points to white, wealthy, heterosexual women taking up the most space

in the influencer space, is a glaring hole in the goals of the film and experiment (Duffy 2015). As

the film progresses and the selection process for the social experiment is documented, there are a

wide array of people featured in terms of who is being interviewed. The selection committee,

however, does predominantly feature white people — the majority is specifically white women.

It's hard to say if this had any role to play in the selection of the final 3 participants, but it can be

inferred that the makeup and demographic of the selection committee did have some type of

effect on who was selected. Although the race makeup of the initial montage in the film and the

screening process for the social experiment is fairly obvious to note, race is never overtly

discussed or even mentioned. This lack of discussion and, arguably, deliberate erasure echoes

Asmaa's comments in O'Neill's article about how race is a taboo topic within the influencer

community; a lack of discussion continues to perpetuate white feminism in these spaces and bars

women of color and people of color from these spaces (O'Neill 2020). When analyzing the sheer

amount of time spent on each of the subjects and their journey to become "famous", we spend

the most time with Dominique, with approximately 19 minutes spent on her journey as opposed

to approximately 16 minutes on the other two subjects. She's the first subject who's backstory we

learn, and thus we're more likely to remember her and get attached to her. As the film continues,

she's the only one who seems to be open and comfortable with the research procedure of the

social experiment, in terms of buying bots and gaining drastic visibility. As the documentary

wraps up, Bilton notes that Dominique is the only subject that they've managed to turn "fake

famous" — without really interrogating why this is. The documentary (perhaps unintentionally)

perpetuates the very same social inequities it seeks to uncover through the lack of racial

commentary, discussion, or even mention paired with the extended amount of time spent on the only white woman subject.

This is not to say that there's no sort of reflection on what made Dominique successful in this experiment at all — Chris even states that Dominique is the type of person who would be successful because she was willing to do whatever it took to change herself accordingly; "I want to be famous for being me… When Dom came in, she's like a piece of Play-Dough, right?... You guys can mold her" (Bilton 2021). This is similar to what Banet-Weiser asserts in her research — white women in particular are willing and able to be shaped and curated, as what they're being curated to are white-centric beauty standards and norms (Banet-Weiser 2021). What this moment lacks, however, is a real critical discussion or examination as to why someone like Chris was less willing or able to bend to the parameters of the experiment compared to Dominique. The film also does touch on important societal issues, especially in relation to recent contemporary movements and events like the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a voiceover, Bilton discusses how a lot of prominent influencers used the BLM protests as a self-promotion opportunity, staging photoshoots at protests and posting simply to signal to their audience that they were morally "in the right" in a very obvious display of performative activism. Wellman describes this being a common trend, particularly among influencers who were white women (Wellman 2022), but this is summarized in 45 seconds in the documentary. Paired with the voiceover was B-roll of several white women influencers dressed in full glam and posing with protest signs for their feeds. The film was in the correct for calling out how troubling this was on a surface level, but didn't take the extra step to discuss the systemic racism underlying the social media influencer machine, and their own roles in recreating this in their social experiment. Neither Bilton nor Dominique reflected on what

their experiment results say about the racism entrenched in social media and influencer culture in general, and this lack of discussion is troubling.

     Fake Famous aims to evaluate and critique the world of social media influencers through attempting to manufacture faim for ordinary people. This critique ultimately falls flat, however, because of a lack of real self-evaluation or general discussion around *why* or *how* Dominique's status as a white woman allowed her to successfully became "fake famous" in comparison to the other two main subjects in the documentary. Future analysis could also be conducted in relation to how Wylie and Chris's status as men has contributed to the results of the social experiment, and how the intersections of their other identities (in terms of sexuality, interest, and more) have contributed as well.

References

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