Blackfishing on Instagram: Influencing and the Commodification of Black Urban Aesthetics

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Abstract
This article examines blackfishing, a practice in which cultural and economic agents appropriate Black culture and urban aesthetics in an effort to capitalize on Black markets. Specifically, this study analyzes the Instagram accounts of four influencers (Instagram models) who were accused of blackfishing in late 2018 and is supplemented with a critical analysis of 27 news and popular press articles which comprise the media discourse surrounding the controversy. Situated within the literature on cultural appropriation and urban redevelopment policies, this study explores how Black identity is mined for its cultural and economic value in the context of digital labor. I assert that Instagram’s unique platform affordances (including its racial affordances) and the neoliberal logics which undergird cultural notions of labor facilitate the mechanisms by which Black identity is rendered a lucrative commodity vis-à-vis influencing.

Keywords
appropriation, blackfishing, influencer, Instagram, neoliberalism

Introduction
In late 2018, freelance writer Wanna Thompson tweeted a crowdsourced list of known “blackfishers,” including Kim Kardashian, Ariana Grande, and several well-known Instagram models and influencers. In particular, White Instagram models such as Emma Hallberg were criticized for adopting what some have called digital blackface, altering their appearance with makeup and using Afrocentric hairstyles to build their personal brand and secure lucrative brand endorsements, darkening their skin in the process. Celebrities, musicians, and Instagram models have been accused of the practice, now commonly recognized as “blackfishing.” This term encapsulates a range of practices such as altering physical appearances through physical and digital means, adopting certain terms and linguistic patterns associated with Ebonics, and the endorsement or selling of products that replicate urban aesthetics. In her Twitter thread analyzing the practice, Thompson writes, “the ghetto [aesthetic] has been repackaged and curated to appeal to the masses,” drawing attention to the new, yet familiar forms of racial commodification and exploitation through blackfishing (W. Thompson, 2018).

The following argument focuses on blackfishing as an act of appropriation being deployed toward capitalist ends in the highly competitive and commercial context of social media influencing. Blackfishing operates within a lengthier history of Black audiences and consumers being captured through appropriative means (Paris, 1993; Vaz, 1995). Regarding social media platforms, W. Thompson (2018) further notes that Instagram itself has become a “breeding ground for white women who wish to capitalize off of racially ambiguous/Black women for social and monetary gain,” pinpointing the connection between digital platforms and marketing logics which position users as economic agents (Duffy, 2015; Marwick, 2013). Such logics have become embedded in platforms themselves, resulting in new modes of digital labor like influencing and Instagram modeling in which racial dynamics are both newly afforded and complicated at the heart of social media economies (Brock, 2020). Coupled with the self-promotional branding logics of digital platforms, blackfishing spotlights the digital and economic tactics available for appropriating and commodifying Black cultural products and practices (Gilroy, 1993; Guadeloupe & de Rooij, 2014; Hall, 1993).

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This article examines the practice of blackfishing, analyzing the Instagram accounts of four models accused of the practice and treating their digital performances as texts where the intersection of racial identity, appropriation, and commodification are made legible. I also interrogate how the resultant media discourse frames blackfishing both as a cultural controversy and fundamentally economic issue. I argue that these models appropriate Black culture and urban aesthetics in their work while obscuring the more racially charged aspects of Black existence, drawing boundaries around which depictions of Blackness are desirable, and thus, profitable. In using makeup and clothing as the products—and excuse—by which these expressions are made permissible, Black identity itself is rendered a viable commodity. I further assert that neoliberal consumer logics and their accessibility to individuals through digital platforms employ entrepreneurial discourses and liberal consumer logics of cultural appropriation become more readily accessible, giving rise to uniquely visual racial affordances. Taken together, neoliberal conditions amplifying an individual’s platform affordances reveal how racialized bodies and spaces are extracted of their cultural and economic value.

**Literature Review**

**The Performance of Race in Digital Spaces**

Online environments center performativity as a key aspect of digital expressions of identity, yet platform-specific affordances can more easily facilitate cultural appropriation and racial commodification online. Scholarship on racial identity highlights how digital spaces accentuate identity’s performative nature. Although the internet allows users to obscure the body due to the digital medium, race is still constructed online, often replicating the racist logics and stereotypes that exist offline (Nakamura, 2013). Consequently, race becomes performative in digital spaces, affording users the ability to assert their racial identity through more implicit means such as demonstrating one’s cultural competence through the use of racialized hashtags on Twitter (i.e., “Blacktags”) (Brock, 2012; Clark, 2015; Sharma, 2013; A. Williams & Gonlin, 2017). In this sense, the “language” of race is embedded in digital platforms by virtue of their affordances, and latent logics of cultural appropriation become more readily accessible to individual users who can effectively harness a given platform’s unique affordances.

The technocultural aspects of new media highlight how culture and technology have become inextricable from one another, rendering Black identity intelligible through digital and discursive means, and Twitter is one space where racial performativity is particularly prominent (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013; A. Williams & Gonlin, 2017). Brock (2012) and Carney (2016) employ critical race theory to analyze the significance of Twitter among Black users where race is asserted and engaged through cultural competence. Here, Black Twitter is conceptualized as a racialized public sphere where race is negotiated, and communities mobilize. The circulation of racialized hashtags on Black Twitter (i.e., “Blacktags”), such as #onlyinthehood, is used to collectively construct and reiterate Black identity and culture (Sharma, 2013). These “Blacktags” exemplify Nakamura and Chow-White’s (2013) “racial affordances” (p. 114), or the mechanisms that enable or disable users to engage in performative racial practices. Racialized hashtags allow users to engage Black identity by using Blacktags in both comedic and political capacities and responding appropriately to shared Black experiences. However, hashtags are free for any user to access, adopt, and engage, making them excellent fodder for cultural interlocutors.

Information itself has become raced in particular ways following the “digitally mediated cultural landscape” (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013, p. 3). For instance, social media sites utilize data-mining practices to build consumer and user profiles about Black audiences for which big tech companies are willing to buy, perpetuating racist practices (e.g., surveillance) and literally commodifying racial identity. Nakamura and Chow-White (2013) argue that the racialization of information is aided through the racial affordances of certain digital platforms, namely, social media. Because the platform privileges visual content, Instagram is a space in which racial identity’s aesthetic performativity is especially evident, giving rise to uniquely visual racial affordances. Taken together, the concept of racial affordances and the commodification of racialized data shed light on how acts of appropriation are directly translated into cultural and economic capital online.

Because of race’s performative nature in digital spaces, uniquely raced practices can be easily appropriated and divorced from their cultural roots. For example, the “Carefree Black Girl” social media subject is a hashtag circulating on Twitter and Instagram which represents a particular racialized and gendered understanding of young Black women (Mooney, 2018). However, the tag has become a form of narrative identity for young Black women which challenges racist stereotypes but has been taken up by non-Black users and media companies looking to increase their own cultural capital. Digital tools—such as hashtags—allow marginalized groups to create, shape, and circulate narratives about issues facing their communities but the popular currency of hashtags (i.e., their ability to “trend”) makes it easy for corporations to access, use, and distribute the tag in question, spotlighting their own voices at the expense of the initial group (Hobson, 2016; Noble, 2013; S. Williams, 2015). In this way, digital tools and platforms can facilitate the appropriation of Black identity.

**Neoliberal Logics and Racialized Subjectivities**

Instagram’s racial affordances and influencing work rely on hypercompetitive, individualizing logics which encourage
users to capitalize on online audiences to compete within digital markets. Influencing is characterized by neoliberal conditions which pit individuals as the sole proprietors of their financial circumstances and position identity as a viable commodity that can be bought, sold, and leveraged to better one’s economic standing. As a set of economic policies and reforms developed in the mid-20th century, neoliberalism is predicated on the assumption that a society shaped by the market is a more efficient and optimal model of governance wherein public resources are privatized (Spence, 2015). Neoliberalism gained prominence during deregulation under the Reagan Administration, but its history is inextricably linked to racial discrimination in legal and economic contexts. Under such a regime, citizens become subjects who are encouraged to understand themselves in relationship to “market principles” (Spence, 2015, p. 3) whereby their labor, identity, and even leisure time are linked to their productive output. In turn, capitalist society produces racialized subjects whose bodies and labor are exploited for cultural value and economic profit.

Neoliberal subjectivities are underscored by industry and consumer logics alike and often work to perpetuate understandings of race void of history and politics. The Foucauldian concept of governmentality is useful for understanding how subjects internalize neoliberal discourses (Foucault et al., 2008). Neoliberal governmentality instructs individuals to “develop [. . .] their human capital” (Spence, 2015, p. 67) to profit within a competitive meritocracy. This structuring ethos urges individuals to understand themselves as commodities and obscures the structural inequities that disproportionally affect Black individuals competing within the system. Racialized subjects are told that participating in the market is more easily facilitated within a color-blind meritocracy which will provide them with opportunities to pull themselves out of generational poverty (Gilbert, 2016; Spence, 2015). Neoliberal logics effectively neutralize appeals to race through entrepreneurial discourses. Racialized neoliberal subjectivities thus erase the historical and political dimensions of race in ways that allow institutions, industries, and cultural actors to appropriate and exploit culture by appealing to niche audiences and Black markets without the worry of Black identity’s political “baggage.”

Neoliberal governmentality invents new ways to protect its domineering logic, employing discourses of rationality buttressed by post-racial sentiments to explain away racist practices (Jones & Mukherjee, 2010). Racialized neoliberal subjectivities make racist forms of expression seem accidental or name them as something other than what they are. This sentiment is evident in the media discourse about blackfishing models who cite tanning as the primary reason for the dark complexions, placing fault on those perceiving the act as racist as an uncanny misunderstanding or being irrational. In this way, overt racist expressions are given leeway if they protect neoliberal projects; per neoliberalism’s individualizing logics, racist acts can be deflected onto a single individual, displacing the need for wider accountability (Mukherjee, 2016). Under a neoliberal regime, agents self-monitor their adherence to neoliberal logics by reaffirming their rationality as a (consumer) subject, using the logic of consumption and opportunistic rhetoric to rationalize their own, enterprising behavior (Szeman, 2015).

Influencing as a mode of digital labor is predicated on the rationality of consumption which reveals how neoliberal value extraction has been executed and justified through digital platforms. Value and profits have long been maximized in urban environments through red lining, gentrification, and urban redevelopment, but these racist practices have been easily replicated online (Boy & Uitermark, 2017; Jackson, 2019; Spence, 2015; Weber, 2002). Media scholars have applied Weber’s (2002) ideas about “creative destruction” (p. 522) to social media platforms, analyzing how racial affordances reproduce urban discrimination in online contexts such as Nakamura and Chow-White’s (2013) discussion of racialized data. Blackfishing Instagram models similarly mine Black culture and urban environments for aesthetic value while partnering with and directing their followers to luxury brands inaccessible to the Black communities that have enabled their success. Scholars note how access to the internet and technological proficiency has an economic logic akin to building highways to bypass Black business districts (Goldberg, 2009; Spence, 2015). In this way, Black communities are mined for their cultural and economic capital, allowing media industries and digital platforms to capitalize on online audiences at Black communities’ expense.

The Commodified of Identity

By neoliberalism’s logic, subjects become intelligible to themselves and others primarily through consumption. Scholars explicitly acknowledge how media and culture industries commodify racial identity through a colonial understanding of representation using Black culture as an example. Racialized and politically charged cultural practices are rendered non-threatening once they are made consumable (e.g., hip-hop), highlighting how the deeply rooted tensions surrounding appropriation as a viable marketing strategy divorces Black culture from its raced and gendered history (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1993). Jackson (2019) similarly uses the appropriation of Afrocentric hairstyles, music, and space to highlight how Black cultural forms are extracted for cultural and aesthetic value in ways that exacerbate “the enormity of [the] wealth gap” (p. 5) between Black peoples, corporate entities, and individuals alike. In this respect, appropriation is necessarily laden with industry logics that have been utilized to exploit racial identity toward profitable ends. In the wake of new media, “modernizing” appropriation through the racial affordances of digital platforms works to separate racist behaviors from new industries while positioning individual actors as the primary perpetrators, encouraging users to mine Black culture to accrue cultural and economic capital (Gilroy, 1993; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013).
Neoliberalism commodifies difference using the same consumer logics it uses to flatten racial, gender, and class diversity. Because consumer rights have replaced civil rights, racial differences become integral in advertising and the selling of goods and services (Gilbert, 2016). A racialized entrepreneurial subject becomes discursively useful insofar as racial difference is a tangible source of brand value when companies seek to market themselves as diverse and access niche markets (Saha, 2018). Moreover, commodification operates as a “structuring technology” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 338) of racialized governmentality where race is transformed into a commodity that can be bought and sold, as most readily evident in media products. In other words, race becomes a way to “spice things up” (hooks, 1992, p. 21) in media representations and American commodity culture where the aesthetic value of racialized bodies and cultural forms are particularly lucrative (Saha, 2018). Thus, the commercial endeavor of influencing is uniquely situated to appropriate racialized bodies and subjects under the guise of “appreciating the aesthetic” while increasing profits for individual actors and their brand partners.

**The Culture and Economics of Self-Branding**

Blackfishing is explicitly understood in relationship to influencing, a mode of digital labor that utilizes neoliberal logics and entrepreneurial discourses which invite users to capitalize on racialized bodies, culture, and aesthetics. As profitable as brand deals and exclusive sponsorships can be for individuals, there are cultural and ideological incentives encouraging individuals to adopt the mantle of “influencer.” Not only do entrepreneurial discourses tell individuals that they deserve to achieve their wildest dreams and greatest ambitions, but when coupled with neoliberal logics posit that they can and should profit from them, the crux of “aspirational labor” (Duffy, 2015, p. 49; McRobbie, 2018). The overwhelming emphasis on monetizing one’s deepest wishes is embedded in a fundamentally American notion of capital where the individual, the body, and our aspirations are subject to commodification in their ability to reinvigorate the market (Gilbert, 2016; Goldberg, 2009). As a form of self-sustained, precarious labor, influencing work is a fruitful breeding ground for logics of capitalist labor pinned to an entrepreneurial subjectivity where the messages that define one’s self-worth are pegged to a person’s ability to garner more attention, and thus make themselves more attractive to potential brand partners (Freberg et al., 2011; Marwick, 2013).

Instagram in particular is a space where “the discursive meets the material” (Edwards & Esposito, 2018, p. 1) and racialized, feminine bodies occupy a liminal space characterized by exploitation and liberation (Limkangvanmongkol & Abidin, 2018). Black women’s bodies are subject to fetishization and commodification on the platform, processes exacerbated by the inherently commercial terrain of influencing. Instagram modeling as a form of visual, self-promotional labor under overtly neoliberal conditions utilizes post-feminist and post-racial discourses to align capital gain through influencing with empowerment (Edwards & Esposito, 2018). Indeed, leveraging one’s feminine and/or racialized body is positioned as a viable path to social and economic success via influencing, encouraging young women to exercise their “erotic capital” on their “own terms” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 112) while obscuring the racist and misogynistic logics that pervade digital platforms (Nakamura, 2013). In this way, young women become ideal neoliberal subjects for their ability to leverage their bodies, or “human capital” (Spence, 2015, p. 67), for aesthetic and monetary value.

Taken together, Instagram’s emphasis on visual aesthetics and the neoliberal logics which commercialize the self give rise to uniquely gendered forms of digital labor. Each digital platform offers a unique set of affordances that dictate which types of content are best suited to a particular site, and Instagram’s focus on singular images prompt more visual, gendered types of self-promotion (e.g., modeling) (Sc colore et al., 2018). The glamor of influencing, buttressed by myths of amateurism and autonomous work, masks the reality that self-branding practices replicate misogynistic industry structures and logics, modeling being one popular example (Duffy, 2015). Women, specifically, perform aspirational labor in which they pursue their dream careers yet remain deeply embedded in consumer culture, employing economic and industry practices as they build a commercially viable personal brand. Part of building a successful brand includes using eye-catching and aesthetically pleasing imagery to draw in new followers. For young women, succeeding in digital labor necessitates a close adherence to normative beauty standards wherein their attractiveness is a profitable asset (Gill & Scharff, 2013; Marwick, 2013). Platform affordances give rise to gendered labor, but its simultaneous racial affordances invite explicitly visual means of appropriation which is the basis of the following study. Rooted in neoliberal consumer logics, Instagram modeling necessarily occupies a commercial space but the existence of racial affordances make appropriating Black and urban aesthetics especially lucrative.

New media’s ability to replicate urban environments online facilitates how influencers engage in blackfishing through the neoliberal logics and racial affordances available to them (Boy & Uitermark, 2017; Spence, 2015; Weber, 2002). Instagram replicates urban spatial politics through “avant-garde” (Boy & Uitermark, 2017, p. 612) visuals prioritized and made consumable on the platform. Boy and Uitermark (2017) explore how cities are “reassembled” on Instagram, arguing that the platform focuses largely on the “aestheticization of everyday life” and “promote[s] places of high-end consumption” (p. 612) which effectively and digitally gentrifies urban environments. Coupled with Spence (2015) and Weber’s (2002) arguments about the way housing discrimination and highway construction are inherently...
linked to representational politics, Instagram replicates neoliberal conditions in which racialized bodies and spaces become viable forms of capital and visual fodder for digital audiences. Bearing this in mind, these research questions guide my study:

**RQ1.** How do neoliberal logics and subjectivities shape the way digital platforms work to commodify racial identity? In terms of influencing, specifically?

**RQ2.** Which representations of Black identity and culture appear in the content of Instagram models accused of blackfishing?

**RQ3.** How does discourse around blackfishing connect race to digital labor?

**Method**

To answer my research questions, I conducted a critical analysis of how Instagram models appropriate Black culture and aesthetics through blackfishing practices and how they leverage neoliberal logics in ways that render Black identity a viable commodity. I examined the Instagram accounts of the four most prominent models accused of blackfishing amid public discourse. The accounts included those of Emma Hallberg, Aga Brzostowska, Mika Francis, and Jaiden Gumbayan, all non-Black women in their late teens and 20s who were working as Instagram models at the time. I examined their profile pictures, bio, and all visible posts (visual images, captions, tags) to textually analyze their digital (racialized) personae and conducted a critical discursive reading of how the corresponding captions and tags are used to contextualize the images themselves (Brock, 2018; Duffy, 2015).

I analyzed a total of 1,483 posts between these Instagram accounts collected through 31 December 2020. Many posts which previously appeared on the models’ accounts were archived through Wanna Thompson’s Twitter thread but later removed from their respective pages. While Brzostowska, Francis, and Gumbayan have all removed several posts such as those captured in the media discourse, Hallberg has not removed any posts. I selected Instagram as my primary object of study because of the platform’s racial affordances and heavily visual nature, the very structures by which blackfishing is made possible.

As the figures named most often within the media discourse about blackfishing and its most readily identifiable actors on social media, Hallberg, Brzostowska, Francis, and Gumbayan are particularly emblematic of the practice itself and its cultural positioning by media companies and news institutions. Although blackfishing is not limited to expressions on digital media, influencing work reveals how social media renders both space and identity consumable through individualized digital labor and performance. My study is interested in the physical acts of blackfishing where Instagram models alter their skin, features, and physique in ways that commodify Black femininity. Moreover, the nature of influencing work is incredibly gendered, with many lifestyle and beauty influencers being largely and disproportionately female which further informs my focus on these young women, specifically (Duffy, 2015; Gill & Scharff, 2013).

To contextualize my analysis of the Instagram accounts, I also analyzed the media discourse about blackfishing, specifically articles that mention one of the models whose Instagram content I examined. The articles are sampled from both digital media companies and traditional news entities (e.g., BuzzFeed, Teen Vogue, BBC News, Inside Edition). I located the articles through Google, using key terms such as “blackfishing,” “Emma Hallberg,” “digital blackface,” and “white Instagram models” to initiate my search. I analyzed a total of 27 popular and news articles published in the months following W. Thompson’s (2018) Twitter thread. I examined how blackfishing is positioned as a cultural phenomenon and how entrepreneurial discourses are engaged to contextualize the practice. The articles shed light on the neoliberal logics used to make sense of the situation when faced with overt and implicit forms of racial commodification. This discursive inquiry is in line with Brock (2018) and Nakamura and Chow-White’s (2013) methodological approach to digital communities where racialized subjects are made intelligible through digital tools and platform affordances.

Blackfishing illustrates the complex tapestry of racial and gender dynamics made intelligible through racial affordances leveraged by neoliberal logics and consumer subjectivities. My operating definition of blackfishing included Instagram models who appropriate Black culture and aesthetics in their digital personae and who use the platform specifically to make a living through brand deals and sponsorships, drawing on the literature which differentiates social media personalities and those who exist as economic agents actively engaged in influencing (Freberg et al., 2011; Marwick, 2013). Coupled with an analysis of the media discourse about blackfishing, this study revealed which aspects of Black identity and culture are deemed desirable—and therefore, profitable—and how digital platforms undergirded with neoliberal logics aid in rendering Black identity and culture lucrative commodities ripe for extraction.

**Analysis**

While the culturally appropriative aspects of blackfishing are evident in each model’s Instagram posts, the resultant discourse normalizes the neoliberal logics undergirding influencing as an individualized and hypercompetitive enterprise. Because blackfishing exists, in part, as a manifestation of how neoliberal logics shape digital platforms, the individualized economic pressure in influencing encourages users to locate culture to exploit as a commodity. Granted, blackfishing is not
the only form of cultural appropriation nor is the practice limited to its digital expressions indicated in the media discourse which pins blackfishing to social media, specifically (Gawronski, 2019; Petter, 2018; Rasool, 2018). However, the case of blackfishing influencers is an extreme yet illustrative example which makes neoliberal, racialized dynamics blatant.

Neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship and competition for attention on social media normalize visual appropriation within influencing. Figure 1 shares a screenshot of one of Emma Hallberg’s Instagram posts which encapsulates the racial commodification and economic logics underlying the work of Instagram modeling. Hallberg wears darkened foundation accentuated with a shimmering highlighter, a fitting match for her large gold hoop earrings, gleaming “Goddess” nameplate necklace, and Louis Vuitton do-rag amid the fading “golden hour” light. Her plumped, glossed, partially opened lips bring a sensual aura to the signature “hood girl couture” look historically associated with Black women (Jackson, 2018). The caption provides a link to her brand partner’s Instagram account. For Hallberg, this dreamy, suggestive, and racially coded look provides the perfect means by which to showcase her accessories, available for purchase at Hidden Cult. Here, cultural appropriation translates Black aesthetics into tangible value and is cast as natural—even expected—for influencing work where individual agents capitalize on cool, edgy aesthetics to attract followers and brand partners alike.

**Depicting the Desirable Black Aesthetic**

Although the appropriation of Black aesthetics in not new, the issue has drawn strict scrutiny in recent years due to how it has been newly revived in popular culture and on digital platforms. Celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Ariana Grande, both of whom were named in Thompson’s blackfishing list, demonstrate shifting standards of beauty which have recently included having a big butt, large breasts, plump lips, and tanned skin, traits popularized by the celebrities in question but traditionally associated with Black women (Goldman et al., 2014; Woodard & Mastin, 2005). Part of how the Instagram models alter their appearance to mimic Black aesthetics includes using photo editing software, lighting techniques, and makeup to alter their physical appearance. These replications of Blackness draw boundaries around which expressions of Black identity are most appealing and attractive. For instance, Hallberg and Aga Brzostowska, who both openly claim their White racial identity, intentionally alter (darken) their appearance to promote the products they endorse in their posts and to increase their following as Instagram models. Mika Francis similarly uses foundations, bronzers, highlighter, and other makeup to significantly
darken her normally pale complexion to showcase cosmetic products. Each model’s skin tone is identifiably brown, but light-skinned. Their hair is often straightened or worn in loose waves, a look sometimes coupled with laid edges and vibrant patterned bandanas. In several posts, Hallberg terms this her “natural” look.

Light-skinned, loose-curled representations of Black women have been analyzed as a more palatable form of Black identity because of its proximity to Whiteness, and Hallberg and Francis’ Instagram personas embody racialized beauty standards (Goldman et al., 2014; Woodard & Mastin, 2005). Patton (2006) and C. Thompson (2009) assert that what is often valuable about the Black subject is its ability to imitate Whiteness. Patton (2006) uses what she terms “The Lily Complex” to discuss Black women’s desire to appear lighter and adopt less-textured hairstyles, resulting in racialized self-loathing. This term also functions as a standard to which Black women tend to aspire, yet the same damaging criteria is clearly illustrated in Hallberg and Francis’ posts. In the age of Instagram modeling and self-branding on social media, it consequently becomes possible for White individuals to make money by presenting themselves as a commodifiable, “not quite white” subject by adopting the aforementioned aesthetics. In carving out the boundaries for which elements of the Black body are deemed desirable, blackfishing influencers are also identifying which features are the most profitable, cleverly positioning products (e.g., lip plumper and highlighter) as the commodity rather than racial identity.

Furthermore, Hallberg’s “kinky” curls and Brzostowska’s use of braids and cornrows necessarily play into discourses about Black/natural hair given the terminology used to describe such looks in the captions of their posts, identifying these styles as “natural hair” or lamenting how they struggle to lay their “edges.” Natural hair is often described in terms of a number-letter system which denotes one’s hair texture. For instance, 2B hair corresponds to loose, wavy hair while 3C represents a kinkier corkscrew curl pattern and 4C is characterized by tight, densely packed coils. In dubbing her wavy, 2B/C hair as “natural,” Hallberg is further asserting which types of textured hair fit safely within normative beauty standards for Black women, in particular.

Conversely, Brzostowska explains her occasional braids and cornrows simply as an act of appreciation, remarking “I really appreciate the culture and I really just love the look,” echoing a similar statement from Jaiden Gumbayan who cited her appearance as part of her appreciation for Black women (Virk & McGregor, 2018). Brzostowska further cites the backlash against her as a result of stereotypes about what (White) Polish people look like, noting that her features (i.e., plump lips and curvaceous figure) do not easily fit expectations. Although the frequency of Black and Afrocentric hair styles differs between models, each model’s hair is still a far cry from the coarse, kinky coils with which Black women have historically contended. Brzostowska’s response in particular relies on discourses of rationality substantiated by post-racial logics about White stereotypes to justify her behavior, erasing the uniquely raced and gendered history of natural hair discrimination in school and workplace grooming policies (Jones & Mukherjee, 2010; Petter, 2018; Virk & McGregor, 2018).

Taken together, each model’s Instagram account depicts a hypersexualized version of the Black feminine body. Brzostowska and Gumbayan, in particular, utilize half-lidded “bedroom eyes” and unnaturally accentuated curvaceous hips and breasts through corsets and photo editing in their appropriation of Black femininity, echoing the Jezebel stereotype (A. Williams & Gonlin, 2017; Woodard & Mastin, 2005). The composition of these posts invites the onlooker to adopt a heteronormative gaze, fetishizing the Black female form by softly emphasizing her most desirable and exotic traits. For instance, one of Gumbayan’s most popular and controversial posts depicts the fair-skinned model with a shockingly darkened complexion and sporting a burgundy bikini. Her eyes are half-lidded and most of the shots are taken from a high perspective as Gumbayan drapes herself over various objects (overturned trees, rocks, etc.) in the outdoor environment. The image has since been removed from her account but remains accessible through a Google image search and in the popular press articles covering the issue. Likewise, Brzostowska often wears short, tight-fitting dresses that draw the eye toward her breasts and thighs. In Figure 2, her hair is woven into a thick strand of braids and the cut-outs in the dress’s design reveal her slim waist. These oversexualized representations demonstrate the allure of the Black feminine body but their context in the inherently commercial endeavor of influencing positions Black female sexuality as especially lucrative, playing upon a fetishistic cultural consciousness and leveraging digital platforms to sell sex in new ways (Noble, 2018).

Visually, Instagram positions the body as the center of cultural production and self-promotional logics of influencing. Images are automatically equipped with fixed settings—though photos can still be altered and edited—the sizing better suited to self-portraits than landscape shots. The affordances are such that images of the body are the most easily translated onto the platform (Edwards & Esposito, 2018; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Marwick, 2013). With respect to Instagram influencing and modeling, the monotony of faces and figures on a given feed needs to be broken up with attention grabbing content, and hypersexualized images of exotic “othered” women in an already gendered space achieves such an end (Edwards & Esposito, 2018). Appropriating the Black feminine body becomes an effective tool for capitalizing on attention whereby a fetishistic gaze is deployed to attract new followers. Where Nakamura and Chow-White (2013) examine racial affordances on Twitter and Facebook because the body is fully obscured by the medium, Instagram’s unique affordances encourage users to engage in more physical, phenotypical, and embodied forms of appropriation. Thus, Instagram allows models to simply look the part of...
Black women rather than assert or defend their position through cultural competence (Brock, 2012; Clark, 2015).

**Appropriating Urban Aesthetics as an Extension of Racist Politics**

The locations and background shots used in each model’s content further reveal their aesthetic appropriation of urban spaces and its historically associated identities. Several of Hallberg’s posts show her lounging in a large bed, relaxing by a gorgeous blue in-ground pool, or draped over a plush cushion in a well-kept dressing room stall. When she finds herself in a setting that appears to be more industrial or (undesirably) urban, she blurs the background which she subsequently makes light of in the corresponding captions. Here, Hallberg showcases and sells her consumption of luxuries which cultivates a particular neoliberal subjectivity around Instagram modeling and influencing work: one who has the luxury of leisure time. Influencing is disproportionately a venture most easily facilitated for young, White, upper-middle-class women for this very reason (Gill & Scharff, 2013; Scolere et al., 2018). The precarity of Instagram modeling requires the entrepreneur to have financial stability and the leisure time necessary to fully dedicate oneself to the long, unpaid hours of self-promotion, resources seldom afforded to minority populations. Hallberg’s luxurious backgrounds not only highlight the racial and economic inequities characteristic of influencing work, but also function as an extension of racist urban development where Black communities were bypassed through infrastructures specifically so that White families could travel to and enjoy the city without having to confront the lived reality of Black urban life (Boy & Uitermark, 2017; Spence, 2015). Here, the neoliberal logics structuring Instagram’s platform affordances replicate the role of highways and mapping of commercial districts.

However, there are cases in which certain urban environments become desirable and aesthetically pleasing. In line with her selection of which aspects of Blackness are most desirable, Hallberg is also selective about the environment in which her modeling photos exist. Posts featuring urban settings have Hallberg posed in front of a white, neatly painted brick wall. Sensually posed with one hand on her hip and the other brushing back her hair, her legs are wrapped in red suede thigh-high boots while a graphic tee paired with ripped jean shorts round out the rest of her outfit (Figure 3). Another post shows her posing near a line of very clean, well-kept, white storage units, this time dressed in a tight red jumpsuit.

**Figure 2.** Aga Brzostowska modeling one of her dresses.
light, often crouching in a “rap squat” to better feature the footwear being endorsed (Jackson, 2018). Likewise, Brzostowska’s posts have featured her in a vibrant orange-red dress in front of a Cheetos display at a local gas station and posing next to a well-worn brick wall adorned with street art of a Black man gazing into the distance. In the caption, Brzostowska describes the image as her “summer mood” and has included a link to the sponsor’s account.

Interestingly, Gumbayan’s account contains photos of her without dark makeup and wigs alongside images of her wearing brown foundation, plumping her lips, and sporting various permed, wavy, and colored wigs. In Figure 4, she can be seen in a low squat, wearing a vibrant yellow hooded jacket, large hoop earrings, and a gold choker set against an industrial looking gate foregrounded by cracked and discolored concrete. Although her complexion is much lighter here, the very next post (Figure 5) has Gumbayan set against a green concrete wall wearing a tight body suit, velvet heeled boots, and a curled black wig. Her skin tone is considerably darker here, though nowhere near as dark as depicted in her incriminating photo shoot.

Gumbayan’s posts illustrate blackfishing’s highly performative nature in which racialized bodies and aesthetics are rendered accessories themselves, able to be adorned and shed at a whim. The media discourse about the practice similarly describes blackfishing as a kind of digital blackface in which “white people darken their skin tone with makeup as a form of fancy dress” while other articles describe the influencers as donning a “costume” (Jackson, 2018; Petter, 2018). The visual play on “dress up” explicitly demonstrates how Black identity is treated as a commodity, something to “spice up” (hooks, 1992, p. 21) a photo shoot or, in this case, the monotony of Gumbayan’s Instagram feed bearing a sequence of largely unfiltered looks.

In these cases, Hallberg, Brzostowska, Francis, and Gumbayan are literally whitewashing an urban environment to present a more palatable, seductive representation of Blackness. Not only are the models appropriating Black identity, but they are also selling an identity of what we imagine the “cool” Black subject to be (Hall, 1993; Jackson, 2019). Urban aesthetics are being utilized as chic, casual backdrops for each woman’s posts, highlighting their luxury and urban clothing in the process. In this way, Black culture and art literally become a backdrop for the value extraction and economic exchange of racialized products between businesses and individual economic agents. As such, conversations about Black urban life, red lining, and gentrification are relegated to the background and erased in their whitewashed depictions on these accounts. Consequently, Instagram models use a makeup and urban aesthetics to market racial identity as a valuable commodity, one that comes free of history and free of politics, but not free of charge.

Figure 3. Emma Hallberg modeling her new red suede thigh-high boots.
Figure 4. Jaiden Gumbayan posing in a rap squat sporting a bright yellow jacket.

Figure 5. Jaiden Gumbayan modeling her athletic body suit and suede-heeled shoes. Uploaded 2 days after the post depicted in Figure 4.
Luxury Consumption as a Marker of Racialized Consumer Subjects

The lucrative work of influencing can drive material consumption practices whereby Black cultural aesthetics are sold back to Black communities at grossly inflated prices, rationalized by neoliberal consumer subjectivities which position consumption as an integral part of citizenry (Gilbert, 2016; Szeman, 2015). Hallberg, Brzostowska, and Franics often feature expensive clothing and aesthetics in their posts (e.g., Louis Vuitton track suits) but are marketed as urban. Because Black communities are subjugated by economic and cultural systems, the Black consumer subjectivity to which blackfishing models are appealing in their content is simply not affordable (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1993). Co-opted expressions of identity ultimately replicate long-standing racist stereotypes that are now able to be consumed and adopted by wider audiences (Guadeloupe & de Rooij, 2014). Like Gilroy (1993) and Hall (1993), Guadeloupe and de Rooij (2014) argue that as Black cultural aesthetics become accessible to other populations, consumers can lay claim to Black racial identity through product consumption while leaving the uniquely raced history of economic and political exploitation by the wayside. In other words, blackfishing gives rise to racialized neoliberal subjectivities which displace racist histories by focusing narrowly on Black markets and consumption.

Inviting followers to adopt the aesthetics being marketed in their content, blackfishing models offer users a way to enjoy Black cultural products while avoiding direct connections or associations with Black business. Guadeloupe and de Rooij (2014) note that it is difficult to keep the Black dollar in the community and for Black businesses to source their products from other Black-owned businesses. These influencers are ultimately taking an aesthetic from the Black community and placing it within White and mainstream consumer culture which carries material economic consequences. For instance, the follower who can afford the Louis Vuitton track suit featured in one of Hallberg’s posts is likely not one of the underrepresented minorities whose aesthetic Hallberg is appropriating; rather, the profit Hallberg and her brand partners receive through her work actively keep money circulating within White, wealthy spheres of consumption (Weber, 2002). Blackfishing displaces Black economic and cultural capital and re-centers it within the context of White, mainstream standards of beauty and fashion, divorcing it from its roots and offering it up to the (White) masses.

Displacing Black markets and consumers is further confounded by each model’s position as an economic agent, their posts encouraging followers to purchase and replicate desirable Black aesthetics in a more palatable way by sidestepping Black businesses. Brzostowska also incorporates luxury brands into her content, often showcasing her outfits in front of a carefully displayed wall of high-end Nike shoes set against pristine white shelves and indicating where followers can purchase her look. This erases the systemic issues that Black businesses face and further undermines the cultivation of economic capital (with)in Black communities (Paris, 1993; Vaz, 1995). In this way, Hallberg and Brzostowska are exploiting long-standing industry tactics that use appropriation to sell racial identity while inviting Black communities to participate equally in the market. Here, consumption is conflated with neoliberal ideas about equality; when luxury brands become accessible to Black markets, Black communities are envisioned and hailed as consumer subjects who can keep the market invigorated by devouring their own cultural products at exorbitant rates.

The Logics of Neoliberal Marketing Strategies

As my analysis illustrates, identity has been conceptualized as a viable commodity, as a “natural” resource able to be exploited by virtue of marketing strategies aiming to appeal to niche markets and widen consumer bases. Neoliberal logics have facilitated Black identity’s move into the sphere of commerce, now used as cultural fodder suitable for influencing work and marketing (Saha, 2018; Spence, 2015). Not only have blackfishing models appropriated Black culture, but the neoliberal logics which inform influencing work reinforce the idea that appropriation is permissible insofar as it is economically viable. In each model’s content, the uniquely raced and gendered histories of Black people living in the United States are obscured, the most valuable (profitable) aspects extracted from this history and offered up as a desirable commodity to be sold back to the White and Black markets alike.

The media discourse about blackfishing tends to highlight some poignant racial histories but spends much more time rationalizing why this behavior exists, ultimately obscuring the politics of the practice. For instance, several of the articles quote one voice—normally an “everyday” woman or Black influencer—to explain how blackfishing could be considered racist yet these articles disproportionately spotlight two to three other models accused of blackfishing through lengthy quotes to address the “other side” of the issue (Ghebremedhin, 2018; Rasool, 2018; Virk & McGregor, 2018). In this way, the models are given a platform to rationalize their appearance and behaviors, emphasizing that it is the fault of others for misunderstanding their behaviors as racist.

In another telling example, Brzostowska is quoted by the BBC as admitting that she darkens her skin through tanning but does not feel she has done so “in a malicious way” and citing it as a leisurely activity (Virk & McGregor, 2018). Hallberg also uses tanning as the explanation for her dark complexion, saying “I get a deep tan naturally from the sun” in an interview with BuzzFeed (Chen, 2018). Gumbayan even apologized for her problematic photo shoot, citing the seriousness of natural hair politics and racial discrimination, yet her apology post insists that she has been “falsely accused of [. . .] cultural appropriation” and similarly names tanning
as the reason she appeared so dark in the shoot (Arboleda, 2017). Although she has since removed quite a few posts, Gumbayan’s Instagram still shows the model wearing curly wigs, darker foundation, and using lip plumper alongside posts featuring her more natural looks. Jones and Mukherjee (2010) provide a useful framework for analyzing this decision with discourses of rationality, noting that neoliberal subjectivities collapse larger, institutional problems onto the individual in ways that privilege discourses of rationality to defend these behaviors. Because media discourses frame blackfishing as a curious, bewildering individual act, it becomes easier to use rationalization to defend seemingly isolated cases as a series of “missteps” rather than engaging the lengthy history of racism and appropriation directly.

Coverage of blackfishing aids in the viability and visibility of rationalizing arguments, casting the issue not as a political one, but as a controversy fundamentally rooted in misunderstanding. One article cited Deja, a Black influencer, to contextualize the phenomenon, quoting her: “I wasn’t really mad, I was just kind of shocked because this girl genuinely looks like a mixed black person” (Rasool, 2018). The article concludes by acknowledging that thousands of Black women are upset by the practice but chooses to spotlight a tweet dismissing the controversy altogether. In this way, many of the articles address the history of race indirectly by quoting other Black influencers about their specific, individual experiences with the practice yet encourage readers to view the issue through the perspective of the White influencers who feel they have done nothing wrong and who have carefully considered explanations to defend their behaviors.

Of the 27 articles, 8 referenced Rachel Dolezal, a White woman who had intentionally altered her appearance to look Black and identified as “transracial,” becoming a professor of Africana Studies and NAACP chapter president before her parents revealed her racial identity in 2015. Dolezal is used to bookend conversations about blackfishing, mentioned largely in the closing paragraph in each article. Dolezal clearly appropriated Black aesthetics and is deployed as another confounding example in media coverage about blackfishing but her actions are never analyzed. Instead, blackfishing models are depicted as isolated albeit strange cases of racially confused individuals, linked to the politically charged notion of transracial identity without further comment. Consequently, the separation of history and politics from Black culture goes without substantial intervention and the neoliberal logics of rationalizing individual behaviors (i.e., making sense of racism on an individual, case-by-case basis) obscures the institutional roles in perpetuating these problems and logics.

Another sentiment which characterizes the media discourse about blackfishing is the notion that Black influencers are struggling to secure brand deals and endorsements, amplified by the models’ behavior. Accusing blackfishing models of “taking” away from Black women and “unfairly” intervening with potential brand deals, the root of blackfishing’s malicious consequences is not limited to its inherent racism but is instead positioned within the context of opportunistic rhetoric (Virk & McGregor, 2018). Returning to Teen Vogue’s interview with Deja, the young woman remarks “not even black people are getting the same amount of attention [Hallberg]’s getting” (Rasool, 2018). Here, entrepreneurial discourses are leveraged to communicate the practice’s more immediate effects: loss of revenue for young entrepreneurs. Although this brings attention to the economic gaps and issues faced disproportionately by young, Black entrepreneurs, the discursive framing positions blackfishing explicitly as an odd but primarily economic endeavor. Here, Hallberg, Brzostowska, Francis, and Gumbayan are positioned as agents who have intervened in the “natural” course of competitive market dynamics by unfairly acquiring resources (e.g., publicity, followers, brand deals).

Neoliberal logics are so deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness that the prevailing way to make sense of blackfishing in public discourse is to examine how it has adversely affected the market and “natural” competition between entrepreneurial actors. This is precisely why self-promotional branding and neoliberal subjectivities have gained traction (and vice versa) because work and life are presented within a fundamentally economic context under neoliberal conditions (Scolere et al., 2018; Szeman, 2015). Neoliberal consumer logics continue to perpetuate less visible racist practices, and their availability not only to industries but also to individuals further conceals the fact that such institutional strategies are implemented every day. Making racialized neoliberal logics available to individuals like Hallberg, Brzostowska, Francis, and Gumbayan in an age of self-branding and online modeling creates an environment in which practices like blackfishing become possible. Coupled with Instagram’s racial affordances which invite a gendered and racialized version of aesthetically appealing bodies, the convergence of entrepreneurial discourses, consumer subjectivities, and neoliberal logics conspire to produce a commercialized digital space in which racialized bodies, culture, and aesthetics can be more egregiously appropriated and commodified.

**Conclusion**

Blackfishing Instagram models are not only appropriating Black cultural aesthetics in their personal brand but are subsequently drawing up boundaries around which expressions and representations of Blackness are desirable. The light-skinned, loosely textured hair and plump lips featured in their content are indicative of normative White beauty standards as a measure to which the Black feminine body should aspire (Goldman et al., 2014; Patton, 2006; Woodard & Mastin, 2005). Phenotypically Black attributes being positioned as the most desirable features for Instagram success, particularly within the context of economic agents on social media, are also being deemed the most profitable in the
process. This explicitly illustrates one of the ways in which identity is rendered consumable, but also speaks to larger issues regarding industry strategies used to exploit Black markets (Gilroy, 1993; Guadeloupe & de Rooij, 2014; Hall, 1993).

The persona each model adopts reveals the neoliberal consumer logics that underlie self-branding practices on platforms such as Instagram. For the models accused of blackfishing, race is positioned as a cultural resource that can be exploited, re-packaged, and sold to varying consumer bases. Blackfishing is clearly an act of appropriation, but the critical insight here is that Instagram’s racial affordances more readily enable the commodification of racialized bodies and spaces. Instagram’s unique affordances make intelligible the mechanisms by which identity is exploited as a valuable resource and, in so doing, co-construct the neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivities being hailed by self-promotional labor (Duffy, 2015; Marwick, 2013; McRobbie, 2018). Somewhat obscured by Instagram’s visually oriented platform, the latent neoliberal logics which render identity a viable and seemingly natural commodity void of political history are clearly seen in bursts of cultural controversy surrounding race, evidenced through the media discourse which frames blackfishing in terms of its economic consequences.

The numerous posts which depict these models appropriating urban aesthetics and backgrounds in their content highlight how Instagram turns expressions of identity into a gentrifying force. Instagram makes space consumable given its visual and branded nature, and the practice of blackfishing illustrates how urban spaces are leveraged to accrue cultural and economic capital (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). Instagram’s digital platform coupled with its racial affordances thus provide the mechanisms by which the logic of appropriation is normalized through aesthetic value. Indeed, Black bodies, culture, and environments have historically been exploited by brands to neutralize the potentially resistive threat of their cultural expressions. Utilizing urban environments in their content, these influencers similarly engage in the politics of urban spatialization where Instagram’s platform facilitates the appropriation of urban space which is, in turn, extracted of its cultural value and rendered economically viable. In this way, acts of appropriation and urban redevelopment are both embedded in and enabled by digital platforms on which individuals compete for attention, followers, and brand deals (in the case of influencers) through eye-catching, racialized aesthetics.

Neoliberalism and its resultant subjectivities have made appropriation profitable, encouraged by Instagram’s platform and racial affordances. Each model’s content illustrates the logic of appropriation as a viable marketing tactic; analyzing the carefully packaged visual-text combinations allows the critical analyst to map neoliberal logics and situate them within larger discourses about the production of identity and its commodification. Here, Instagram’s hypercompetitive capitalist dynamics push individuals to appropriate culture, instructing subjects to mine cultural forms to sell something “cool” to their followers. Hallberg, Brzostowska, Francis, and Gumbayan fit within a larger history of industries and businesses utilizing appropriation as a marketing tactic that is available to widen profit margins and consumer bases alike (Parisi, 1993; Vaz, 1995). In divorcing Black aesthetics and culture from their history, these companies—and presently, influencers—often end up whitewashing urban aesthetics to make them more palatable for consumers, appropriating Black culture and gentrifying urban aesthetics toward explicitly capitalist ends.

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