

On Leggings and Lemongrass Shots: How Momfluencing Perpetuates the Feminine Mystique

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Abstract: In this paper, I situate the Instagram ‘momfluencing’ industry within Betty Friedan’s framework of the feminine mystique, specifically the sexual sell. The sexual sell is the concept of targeting housewives for profit, promising identity and fulfilment in exchange for product purchase. I bring this into conversation with the momfluencing industry by integrating Friedan’s research on the impact of 1950s women’s magazines with modern research on the impact of social media advertisements (specifically through influencers) on women. Then, I apply my comparative work to some of the most popular momfluencers. I claim that while advertisements today do not appeal so explicitly to a woman’s rightful place in the home, the sexual sell has not been eradicated—it has mutated. What makes the momfluencer different (and more dangerous) than the straightforward magazines of the 1950s is her marketing approach: she is not just selling products. Rather, she brands herself and she is the product. Furthermore, I illustrate how momfluencing has armed and mobilized the sexual sell by exploiting the existing identity crises in women. Their lack of fulfilment is what feeds, and has always fed, the feminine mystique. I then state that because the momfluencer can only succeed at the financial and emotional expense of other women, the industry is ultimately destructive. While the momfluencing industry has the potential to be a powerful feminist play with its opportunities for women entrepreneurs, its rampant success must be interrogated: Why is the flawless housewife who ‘has it all’ still the picture of achievement for women? This leads to my conclusion that despite isolated empowerment to the momfluencer herself, the success of her industry limits the role of women everywhere because it squanders women’s identities while capping their potentials at housewifery, impeding progress that could be made otherwise. By showcasing unachievable domestic fantasies and capitalising on women’s lack of fulfilment, the momfluencing industry perpetuates Friedan’s feminine mystique.

Keywords: Feminine mystique, Sexual sell, Social media, Momfluencer, Instagram

1. Introduction

In 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (2010, p. 38) unearthed the culturally embedded myth that ‘the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity.’ This myth, aptly named the ‘feminine mystique,’ encompasses heteronormative cultural ideas surrounding the nuclear family and the so-called nature of women – namely, docile submissiveness within the tunnel vision of housewifery. Under this philosophy, a life outside of the home spoils a woman’s femininity, rejecting her biologically branded destiny (Friedan, 2010, pp. 38, 223). The feminine mystique’s undercurrents are exceptionally strong in advertising, bolstered by a marketing tactic which Friedan (2010, p. 181) terms the ‘sexual sell.’ Through ‘deceptively simple, clever, outrageous ads and commercials,’ the sexual sell siphons women’s purchasing power, which today accounts for 85% of consumer spending in the United States (Friedan, 2010, p. 201; *Purchasing Power of Women*, 2020). These advertisements peddle counterfeit gratification to unhappy housewives by presenting products as shortcuts to feminine fulfilment (Friedan, 2010, p. 182). A Pyrex advertisement from the 1950s captures the essence of the sexual sell: See Figure 1.

Numerous details above scream for feminist criticism – for example, the apron over her wedding dress, her bent-over stance, the erroneous exclamation at the top left – but the most important, and destructive, element of the ad is more subtle. The second paragraph of the copy states, ‘The not-so-glamorous tasks of the kitchen become fun, too, with Pyrex’ (Vishnu, 2021). Pyrex is exploiting housewives’ dissatisfaction with their limited yet exhausting daily tasks, promising that ‘just one dish’ will ‘make failure-free cooking easy’ (Vishnu, 2021). With a heavy gesture to bigger issues than dinner prep, this begs the question: *Does* an all-in-one grease-expelling casserole pan *actually* solve a woman’s problems? In this paper, I will answer this question by bringing the sexual sell into contemporary conversation with the social media influencing industry.



Figure 1: 1950s Pyrex Advertisement (Vishnu, 2021)

2. Momfluencing as the Modern Sexual Sell

The influencing industry extends and complicates Friedan's discussion on the sexual sell. While advertisements today do not appeal so explicitly to a woman's rightful place in the home, the sexual sell has not been eradicated – it has mutated. The Instagram influencer, the face of modern marketing, *influences* followers' lives and purchases through posting 'advertorials,' sponsored content of products that they review and endorse (Abidin, 2016, p. 3). The most popular influencer accounts, such as @hudabeauty and @chiaraferragni, boast over 25 million followers (Schaffer, 2021). While every influencer has their specialty, such as beauty, fashion, or fitness, there is a certain brand that seems pervasively popular: that of the influencer housewife, or 'momfluencer,' as she has been nicknamed. The majority of her followers are female. She endorses gluten-free face serums and pebble ice machines. She plasters her grid with pictures of children clad in organic cotton and proffers discount codes on luxury leggings. Her goal, not far from the 1950s ads Friedan criticizes, is to sway her followers through 'highly gendered content and practices' that suggest she is a woman who 'has it all' – the house with the white picket fence, the loyal husband and stable income, the litter of children filling the home, and so on (Chae, 2017, p. 258). Through 'the monetization of motherhood as identity,' she is the modern incarnate of the sexual sell (Petersen, 2021). Despite isolated empowerment to the momfluencer herself, the success of her industry limits women's progress on a large scale. The momfluencing industry showcases unachievable domestic fantasies and capitalises on women's lack of fulfilment through the sexual sell, thus perpetuating Friedan's feminine mystique.

2.1 Affective Expertise and Vicarious Living

Like anyone else working a full-time job, a momfluencer's career absorbs most of her day, but unlike anyone else, she must make it look effortless. This is what Jezer-Morton (2021) terms 'affective expertise,' the

tightrope a momfluencer must balance between authenticity and aspiration. She must play the role of housewife fancifully, with just the right sprinkle of reality, to maintain popularity (and profit). One example of affective expertise is the following post from momfluencer @annasaccone: See Figure 2.



Figure 2: Example of a Momfluencer’s Affective Expertise (Saccone, 2021)

Despite the conflicting message above (the poised picture beside a caption admitting distress), most of the comments are gracious, assuring her that she makes motherhood look easy and she is doing an amazing job (Saccone, 2021). Because of her careful affective expertise, a momfluencer’s followers are attached to her; they believe they are her intimate friends while still seeing her as a celebrity. Women hunger for 'the illusion of that sense of achievement that housewives seem to need,' and the momfluencer offers that illusion (Friedan, 2010, p. 190). One woman shares:

Instagram reminded me of the world beyond my increasingly messy house. The influencers I followed were dedicated moms who still had time to work on their own projects, go shopping and try new skincare products. Someday, I hoped I would, too. (Dallas, 2021)

A momfluencer’s followers want her to be the women and mothers they fear they are not. They 'divert [their] guilt and disguise [their] growing sense of emptiness' by emotionally investing in the retouched life of their influencer idol (Friedan, 2010, p. 200). They argue over her son’s exact birth date, notice an outfit she hasn’t worn in a while, and express deep (if not creepy) admiration for her family (Mealy, 2020; Blanche, 2019; Swanson, 2021). They feast on the image of her perfection, extracting lifestyle and beauty ideals from this image. Through the momfluencer, they engage in 'vicarious living,' a term Friedan (2010, p. 252) defines as 'a systematic denial and repression of one’s own personality, and an attempt to substitute some other personality.' Vicarious living is implicit in the conventional definition of femininity sustaining the feminine mystique, and it cannot be separated from the reciprocal self-criticism it causes within women (Friedan, 2010, p. 252). In the following screenshot of a post by @lydiabright, the comments are responses to her caption 'Summer body pending' (soon after recovering from giving birth): See Figure 3.

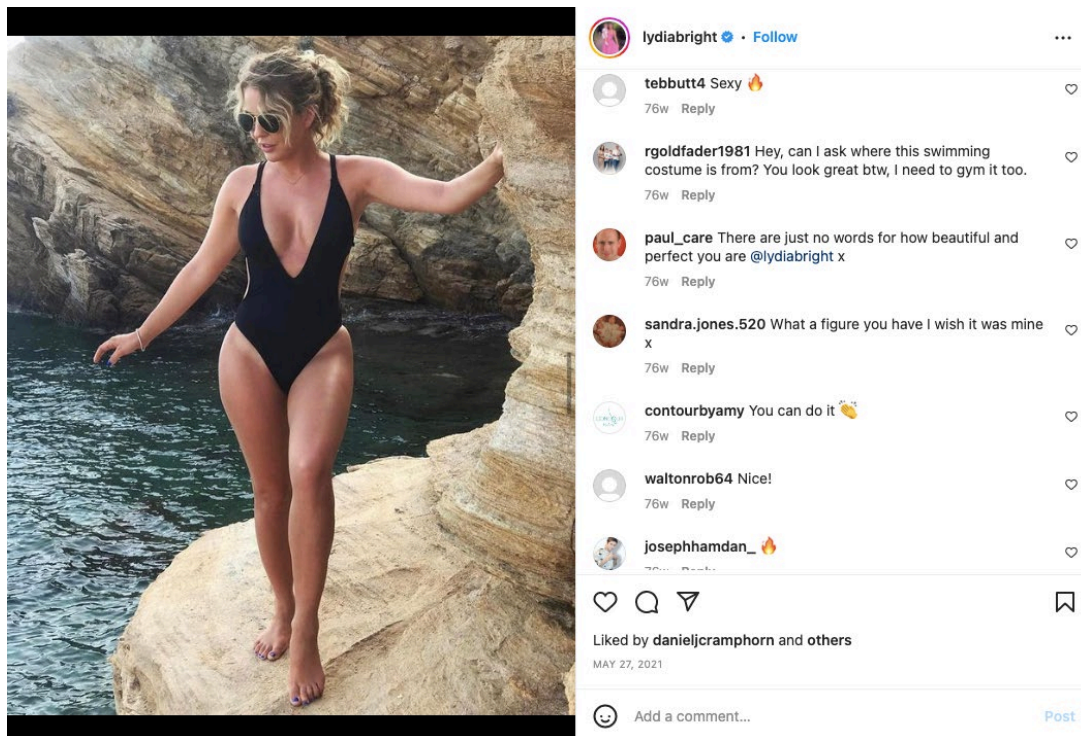


Figure 3: Example of Followers Vicariously Living Through the Momfluencer: Praising her and Criticising Themselves (Bright, 2021)

They praise her body ('There are just no words for how beautiful and perfect you are'), exalting it as the standard of beauty, but then use this standard to judge their own bodies ('What a figure you have I wish it was mine x') (Bright, 2021). Her followers define what a woman's body should look like based on what her body looks like – the momfluencer constructs their reality. And even though Lydia mentions in the caption that this is an old photo, from before she was pregnant, that disclaimer struggles to divorce the 'Sexy' picture from the idea of the postpartum body (Bright, 2021). Her followers could be seen as 'unaware victims,' vicariously living for her beauty, constancy, and perfection but berating themselves in the process (Friedan, 2010, p. 202). It is problematic because it squanders women's sense of self-esteem and promotes housewifery as an end goal, impeding progress that could be made otherwise.

2.2 The Momfluencer's Marketing Approach

Momfluencing has armed and mobilized the sexual sell by exploiting the existing identity crises in women. Their lack of fulfilment is what feeds, and has always fed, the feminine mystique (Friedan, 2010, p. 180). Whether it be beauty magazines, makeup tutorials, or their favourite momfluencers, women have long looked to 'glossy public images to decide every detail of their lives' (Friedan, 2010, p. 64). Studies show that women use social media more than men do (Demographics of Social Media Users, 2021). One likely reason for this is women's desperate search for 'a new image' to model themselves after because 'they have no idea who they are' (Friedan, 2010, p. 64). In pre-influencer culture, ads targeted women by giving a product 'a new personality' (Friedan, 2010, p. 189). Today, that *personality* is as true to form as it gets – it is the (performed) personality of the momfluencer. Her image has virtually the same function as the image in 1950s magazines: 'young and frivolous, . . . fluffy and feminine; . . . gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home' (Friedan, 2010, p. 32). The average momfluencer's endorsements are beauty products, fashion pieces, home and kitchen helps, and fitness supplies – strangely reminiscent of the content in women's magazines of Friedan's (2010, p. 33) time, which 'contained almost no mention of the world beyond the home.' What makes the momfluencer different (and more dangerous) than the straightforward magazines of the 1950s, however, is her marketing approach.

While each momfluencer claims uniqueness in some form, there is one common denominator among them: they're all selling something. Because the momfluencer fosters pseudo-intimate relationships with her followers, she can 'inject advertising into these relationships' and influence their purchasing decisions (Coco and Eckert, 2020, p. 180). For example, one momfluencer @livingmybeststyle flatters her followers by calling them her child's 'IG aunties' (Roach, 2020). This approach works: Coco and Eckert (2020, p. 186) found that

those who believe an influencer is authentic in their advertorials feel more connected to the influencer and thus more inclined to make purchases. Furthermore, followers buy things not only because they trust the influencer but also because they want to support them, as the swipe-ups and the 15% off discount codes are an influencer's commission. Nevertheless, this connection to the influencer is not absolutely necessary – the majority of women who follow an influencer have purchased something via sponsored content, irrespective of their personal attitudes toward the influencer (Coco and Eckert, 2020, p. 187). Therefore, Instagram advertorials are successful in and of themselves, a testament to the deeply embedded power of the sexual sell. It feasts on 'the reservoir that their lack of identity, lack of purpose, creates, to be manipulated into dollars at the point of purchase' (Friedan, 2010, p. 182). Because the momfluencer can only succeed at the financial and emotional expense of other women, the industry is destructive on a large scale.

2.3 The Limits of Momfluencing as a Career Path

Momfluencing has the potential to be a powerful feminist play with its opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Wanting 'something more' from housework is nothing new to American housewives, but today, it can be realized, albeit two-dimensionally, through momfluencing careers (Friedan, 2010, p. 59). Housewifery is now monetizable – not just for living comfortably but for living *in excess* – as demonstrated by the (choice few) momfluencers who make it to the top. In recent years, more and more women have felt inspired to pursue momfluencing careers themselves. One woman says she simply 'wanted to have something for herself outside the day-to-day activities of raising a toddler,' so she created a skincare account @phithegoldenskin, which has quickly gained a large following (Buscemi, 2019). But many women invest time and money into photo-editing and blog-writing classes only to be clotheslined by the cutthroat industry (Jezer-Morton, 2021). Despite how 'easy' it seems to succeed as a social media presence, most people do not succeed in the endeavour. The images of the momfluencer's achievements are precisely the images that hinder women's progress.

Momfluencing does not just curtail women who try and fail to become momfluencers; it also reinforces the stereotype that a woman's place is in the home. This causes one to investigate the limits of momfluencing as a career path. Successful momfluencers are 'hailed as examples of self-made success' (Caldeira, 2018). However, while they support their families substantially or even single-handedly with their social media presences, they accomplish this by 'commodifying the importance of motherhood' (Jezer-Morton, 2021). A momfluencer's success only comes at the expense of other women. Therefore, momfluencers' accomplishments 'shift the focus onto generic celebrations of individualized empowerment, choice and commodity feminism,' making little progress in the aggregate for women (Caldeira, 2018). In this vein, Chae (2017, p. 259) asserts that an 'influencers' image of having it all is just another fantasy that provides an illusory sense of the empowerment of women.' If this valorisation of housewifery continues, women will never truly escape the harmful norms from which the feminine mystique spawns. Friedan (2010, p. 244) uses the phrase, 'liberate them to have careers at home,' to capture the irony of introducing motherhood to a capitalist economic landscape. She (2010, p. 35) defines having a career as 'being somebody yourself, not just existing in and through others.' By this definition, then, where does momfluencing belong? Because the success of the momfluencer depends on how her followers perceive her, does this imply that she only exists in and through others? A dichotomy thus emerges between the career itself and the job description: the momfluencer is, ironically, neither full-time housewife nor career woman.

3. Conclusion

There is nothing inherently malicious about the momfluencer, or even her chosen career path – rather, it's the success of the industry itself that must be interrogated. Why is the flawless housewife who 'has it all' *still* the pinnacle of achievement for women? The suit-clad marketers at long tables in the 1960s would have a heyday over the opportunities available today for 'manipulating the emotions of American women to serve the needs of business' (Friedan, 2010, p. 182). People can now purchase ad space in the form of a woman. The momfluencer is not just selling products – she brands herself and she *is* the product. Woman, a *product*. This is the sexual sell in 2022. The feminine mystique, Friedan (2010, p. 53) notes, 'feeds on the very facts which might contradict it.' It does not matter how many momfluencers out-earn their husbands. Whatever strides they may make for female empowerment are undermined by default of the industry, where 'potentially disruptive feminist ideals' bow to 'commercial interests, comfortably co-existing with their idealized and limited representations of femininities and beauty ideals' (Caldeira, 2018). Her followers' 'benign envy,' masked in admiration, hides their personal dissatisfaction and thereby drives them to flagrant consumerism (Lee and Eastin, 2020, p. 78).

The age of momfluencing has enlarged the lethal emptiness of women and reinforced normative gender stereotypes. The delicate balance in a momfluencer's marketing – more personalized and persistent than any algorithm – lies in instilling a background frustration, quiet enough that her followers do not hear 'the strange, dissatisfied voice stirring within [them]' but loud enough that they keep buying (Friedan, 2010, p. 23). The very nature of her career is consumerism. The sexual sell is her primary marketing tactic. She encourages women to go for their goals with a coy reminder to check out a new swimsuit line she's endorsing (Hannemann, 2021). Her 30-day self-care plan may not include a Pyrex pan, but she promises that her lemongrass wellness shots will help you live your best life. The feminine mystique will last as long as she practises the sexual sell – as long as she continues to idealize housewifery for profit and as long as she promises fulfilment from buying things. So, to address the question posed at the beginning of this essay, the answer is no: As convenient as it would be for a new Pyrex pan to endow a woman with life-long happiness, it simply cannot.

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