

# Influencers' Presentation of Self-care on YouTube: It's Essential, But Inaccessible

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Research on self-care originally focused on helping and health professionals; however, the impression of self-care continues to shift, and it has become a phrase used by laypersons. As more people turn online for self-care information, and as people with positive self-care experiences want to share these, there is more space for influencers to discuss self-care. The purpose of this project was to understand how online space is used by influencers to describe, promote, and educate about self-care. Analyzing 15 influencer videos on YouTube, we identified two themes: Theme 1, Self-Care is Essential, with subthemes (a) Don't Feel Guilty, (b) Create Habits That Support Self-Care, and (c) Self-Care is

Idiosyncratic; and Theme 2, Self-Care Requires Access and Privilege, with subthemes, (a) Maintenance of Beauty Ideals for Women, (b) Trendy, Expensive Lifestyle, and (c) Earn a Self-Care Day. This thematic analysis revealed that inherent privileges presented by influencers have the potential to create a fantasy of self-care that is unattainable by regular viewers and encourages adherence to aspects of consumerism, diet culture, and gender norms.

*Keywords: self-care; influencers; YouTube; qualitative research methods*

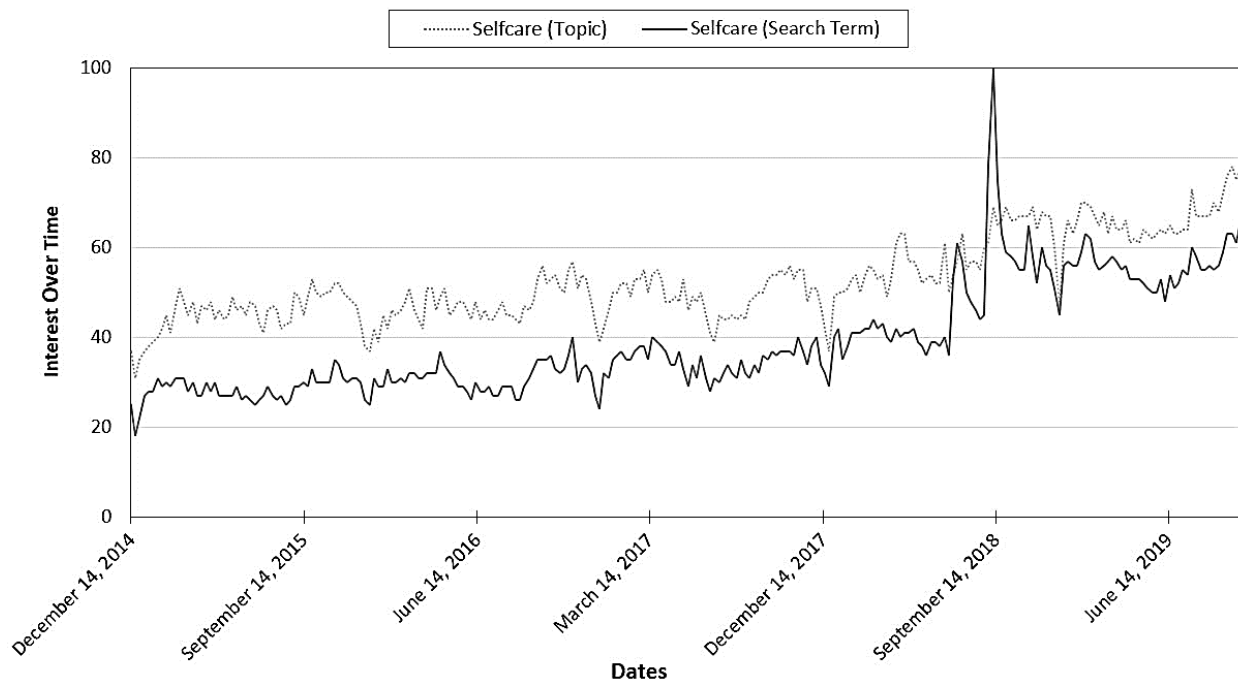
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**S**elf-care was originally conceptualized as strategies for disease management and prevention behaviours that medical patients could perform without professional help (Levin & Idler, 1983). This definition is still used in the medical community. Over time, self-care was reconceptualized and applied to professionals in the helping/health care disciplines who regularly find themselves in emotionally demanding situations (Dorociak et al., 2017). Self-care is often defined within these groups as individualized activities thought to prevent the harmful effects of stress. The benefits of proactive, sustainable self-care are well documented in populations who frequently encounter high stress situations, such as professional psychologists and medical professionals (e.g., Miller et al., 2019).

As a concept, self-care continues to shift and has become a mainstream expectation for laypersons. It appears to be conceptualized in popular media as any activity designed to combat stress and generate feelings of pleasure. More and more, people are discussing the role of self-care in their lives and how to achieve it – and this is reflected in our online worlds. The purpose of our study was to evaluate the messages (both visual and verbal) that are perpetuated online about self-care.

### Increasing Online Search Activity Related to Self-Care

Since 2017, Google Trends shows a steady increase in “selfcare” for both search term and topic (Figure 1). Google Trends is normalized data, useful for indicating the interest and movement of online search terms (i.e., what people type into the search box on Google.com) and topics (i.e., the content that shows up after the search) over time (Google Trends Help, n.d.). This recent, steady increase is further evidence that people are searching online for self-care.



*Figure 1.* Selfcare Interest Over Time via Google Trends. Google Trends does not give specific information about the spikes that occur in their data. The spike at September 2018 might be due to the introduction of “Self-Care September,” an internet challenge meant to encourage the use of self-care activities on each day of the month (e.g., there are 36 000 #selfcareseptember posts on Instagram), and/or, it might be due to interest in the newly released song “selfcare” by Mac Miller after his death on September 7, 2018. The song has 156 092 602 views on YouTube as of December 12, 2019 (Miller, 2018). In either case, the trend shows that self-care content is increasing in interest.

Self-care is also a popular term on other online platforms. For example, searching for self-care on Amazon.com retrieves more than 70,000 hits, with results including books, bath and body products, jewelry, clothes, and even household items like air purifiers. Similar searches on social media platforms reveal millions of tagged images, videos, articles, and statements about self-care. For example, as of December 6, 2019, on Instagram, #selfcare had 21.6 million posts, #selfcaresunday had 650,000 posts, and #selfcarematters had 505,000.

### **The Intersection of Online and Offline Spaces**

Due to the ubiquity of online space, our online and offline spaces intersect (Burgess & Green, 2018; Goodyear & Armour, 2019; Hallet & Barber, 2014). Understanding a person's offline behaviour includes exploring their online behaviour, to the extent that this interconnection provides valuable insight from one to the other (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Mishra & Ismail, 2018). This intersection also means that many people are accessing health and wellness information online (Goodyear & Armour, 2019; Prybutok & Ryan, 2015). Through their use of self-care related hashtags, and because our online space reflects our offline lives, we may infer that people value, and perhaps use, self-care (Zappavigna, 2018; Zappavigna & Martin, 2018).

Online spaces are also participatory spaces (Jenkins et al., 2009). Anyone with minimal technology and internet access can become a content creator. Thus, whereas self-care was previously the domain of medicine and the helping professions, laypersons can now be engaged in informal online education about self-care. The purpose of our project was to understand how online space is used by laypersons to describe, promote, and educate about self-care, using one particular social media platform: YouTube.

YouTube.com is the second most visited website in the world (Richter & Armstrong, 2019). It allows users to navigate the space as passive or active participants, or both (Jenkins et al., 2009). Users who choose to upload videos have the option of making their videos private or public: It is implied that videos set as public are intended to be watched, liked, commented on, and shared (Germain et al., 2017). In May 2019, YouTube had over 2 billion viewers per month (Clement, 2019a) and in July 2019 there were over 1 billion videos watched per day (Smith, 2019). YouTube is generally secretive about its statistics and it is unclear how many channels promote self-care, or the number of hits when

searching self-care. However, since most people use more than one social media site (Clement, 2019b), we might infer their use of self-care hashtags on other sites means people are also searching for self-care on YouTube.

The “people and blogs” category on YouTube makes up 19% of the website’s total views, and 32% of its worldwide video content (Clement, 2019c). This category includes video blogs, or vlogs, which are user-created, personal, conversational, and perceived to be informal (Sanchez-Cortes et al., 2015). For example, during vlogs, they may provide regular and personal updates on their wellbeing as if speaking to a confidante (Lange, 2009; Raun, 2018). The degree of intimacy and vulnerability on this scale of sharing would not be possible in a traditionally offline space (Germain et al., 2017; Hallet & Barber, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2009). Users may feel as if they are a part of a larger system of connections, relationships, and community (Lange, 2009). The participatory culture of YouTube makes it possible for popular culture, and the everyday, to be created, presented, shared, and archived (Burgess & Green, 2018).

*Influencers* are popular social media creators, with differing levels of reach, who engage regular viewers by generating content that is effective at attracting and retaining these viewers (Mishra & Ismail, 2018; Wood, 2019). Some influencers receive payment for embedded advertisements, affiliate links, and discount codes; however, as far as we can tell, there is no publicly available payment structure. Unless disclosed by the influencer, it is difficult for the viewer to infer whether that influencer is paid and, if so, how much.

Viewers may develop parasocial relationships in which the viewer feels as if the influencer is like a real-life friend (Chen, 2016), and influencers often aim for viewers to form such a connection with them. These relationships are more likely to develop when a viewer engages with the content creator regularly (Chen, 2016), which is made possible by the participatory culture of YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2009). Viewers who develop parasocial relationships with influencers can be affected by the influencer’s attitudes and opinions (Chen, 2016; Freberg et al., 2011). Although parasocial relationships are possible no matter how many followers a creator has, influencers generally have greater reach and thus might form more parasocial relationships.

## Current Study

Online space is used by influencers to describe, promote, and educate about self-care. We used thematic analysis to explore influencers' presentation of self-care on YouTube. As the visuals and audio together are integral to influencers' presentation on YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018; Lange, 2009; Molyneaux et al., 2009), it is important to consider what influencers say about self-care, how they say it, and what they show. To the best of our knowledge, no other research has been conducted regarding not only online depictions of self-care, but the use of self-care as a lay concept more broadly.

## METHOD

An accurate data set was created using the recommendations of Rose (2010) and Marchin and Mayr (2012) for the transcription of visual data, combined with Braun and Clarke's (2014) recommendations for the transcription of auditory data. Thematic analysis provided an established means for the identification of patterns, meanings, and themes in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014).

### Data Sources

Fifteen publicly available influencer-created self-care-focused videos were included. Using public online data requires new and unique ethical considerations (Legewie & Nassauer, 2018). Due to the small sample size, potential consequences of their recognition, and inability to obtain explicit consent, we decided to keep the influencers' data anonymous. Thus, their names are presented here as pseudonyms, and dates include only the year of publication.

Table 1 shows influencer and self-care-focused vlog demographic information as of December 6, 2019. It is worth noting that gathering demographic data from online social media sources has limitations (Golder & Macy, 2014). Unless influencers explicitly provide demographic information in their video content or channel descriptions, it can only be inferred.

*Table 1.* Influencer and Self-Care Focused Vlog Demographic Information

Influencer Pseudonym	Subscribers	Video Length	Views	Likes	Dislikes	Comment Number	Paid Content
Victoria	1.77 Million	17:52	128,055	4,000	118	253	Ad, codes
Diana	1.61 Million	8:23	105,619	4,200	120	92	Ad, affiliates
Cami	1.48 Million	13:36	149,945	6,400	134	255	Ad, affiliates
Katie	1.18 Million	12:15	216,157	16,000	92	675	Ad, affiliate, code
Sara	711,000	12:45	438,326	22 000	239	1,003	Affiliates
Dayna	563,000	14:09	134,846	5 300	51	217	Affiliates
Poppy	483,000	10:05	75,000	4 400	21	129	Affiliate, codes
Jasmine	474,000	17:55	120,039	5 900	40	270	Affiliates
Jackie	324,950	7:52	315,950	8 900	249	Comments off	None
Opal	276,000	13:50	18,678	1 300	23	95	Ad, affiliates
Megan	257,000	28:03	147,379	3 700	69	221	Affiliates
Janelle	212,000	8:13	358	18	0	4	None
Leah	146,000	19:29	39,579	1 100	29	65	None
Anna	143,000	10:50	282,034	7 800	231	284	Ad
Cassie	127,000	12:16	24,142	841	19	39	Ad, code

Data collection began on June 3, 2019. We applied the search terms “self care”, “self care routine”, and “self care vlog”, to gather videos. The following inclusion criteria had to have been met for vlogs to be included:

- (a) vlogs had to discuss self-care;
- (b) vlogs had to be personal, informal, and conversational (Sanchez-Cortes et al., 2015) to access influencers' presentation of self-care;
- (c) vlogs needed to have >100,000 subscribers because of their implied wide reach;
- (d) vlogs had to be in English;
- (e) vlogs had to be uploaded in 2019 (the year of study);
- (f) vlogs had to be 5 to 30 minutes long. Videos shorter than five minutes did not provide enough depth of information on how the influencer speaks about self-care, how they say it, or what they show. Videos over 30 minutes were repetitive. We

were interested in a range of video lengths because there are correlations between video length and audience engagement, where shorter videos tend to have more engagement, yet longer videos seem to be encouraged by the site itself (Fishman, 2016).

(g) vlogs had to be publicly available;

(h) there had to be a variety of sponsored and non-sponsored vlogs;

(i) affiliate links and/or discount codes were allowed for non-sponsored vlogs, as long as they were not the focus of the vlog.

The following exclusion criteria were also applied: (j) influencers who were able to give professional mental health advice were excluded; and (k) corporate vlogs were excluded.

### **Data Preparation and Analysis**

We used inductive thematic analysis, due to the lack of existing literature on the presentation of self-care by influencers on YouTube. As there is an inevitable link between the researcher and the data analysis, we engaged in activities that enhanced reflexivity, like memoing (Birks et al., 2008; Herzog et al., 2019). The first author began data analysis by familiarizing herself with the data, watching each vlog in full, at normal speed and creating memos as systematic records of questions, ideas, potential themes, and positionalities (Birks et al., 2008; Herzog et al., 2019). The audio and visuals were transcribed using four columns: timestamp, setting, scene, and audio. First, the audio was transcribed, then matched to the timestamp, setting, and scene. Transcripts were reviewed by both authors as an additional check for accuracy. Next, the first author “transcribed” the visuals. The setting described objects, items, and surroundings that were visible, including the physical characteristics of the influencer. The scene was described as the action that takes place, for example, the poses, gaze, sincerity, and energy of the influencer. She also included the influencer’s distance, angle, and position in relation to the camera (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The first author read through the transcripts once to become familiar with the set overall. Afterwards, she engaged in semantic coding to code what influencers were presenting explicitly and latent coding to apply a critical psychology

lens. The first author continued to keep memos and consult with the second author for consensus.

From here the transcripts were separated into paid content versus unpaid content, to examine any potential differences between types of content. Each data set was analyzed separately, beginning with the paid content. Candidate themes and subthemes were constructed in a way that made sure they are internally homogenous and externally heterogeneous (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014). This process was then repeated with the unpaid content. As the themes in the two data sets were identical, we combined them. We decided upon candidate themes and assessed their strength by reviewing all coded and collated data and developed a thematic map.

## **RESULTS**

### **Overview of Vlog Style**

Each video was analyzed across all three sections (i.e., setting, scene, and audio). It became apparent that, while the influencers have their own personalities, there were notable, common elements in terms of influencer vlog style. Most often, influencers speak casually to the camera. They make natural, regular, and friendly eye contact and use a genuine tone of voice. The vlogs felt easygoing, unscripted, and authentic. Often, the camera seemed to be handled by the vloggers themselves, with simple cuts between scenes, giving the viewer a feeling of non-professional authenticity. For example, it was common for the camera to be tilted, to cut off their forehead, or part of a scene, to move while walking, or to be set down, informally, while the influencer presented their vlog from one setting.

### **Thematic Analysis**

While exploring how influencers present self-care on YouTube, we developed an understanding of what they are depicting, what they are promoting, and how they are educating others about self-care. This thematic analysis has two themes, each with three subthemes: Theme 1, Self-Care is Essential, with subthemes (a) Don't Feel Guilty, (b) Create Habits That Support Self-Care, and (c) Self-Care is Idiosyncratic; and Theme 2, Self-Care Requires Access and Privilege, has subthemes, (a) Maintenance of Beauty Ideals for Women, (b) Trendy, Expensive Lifestyle, and (c) Earn a Self-Care Day.



**Theme 1: Self-care is Essential.** Influencers' unanimously endorsed self-care as an essential way to relieve stress, maintain positive mental health, and experience contentment. This theme is evident in the vlogs by what the influencers say and the surface level of what they show while going about their day. Each influencer depicts self-care as an indispensable piece of a healthy lifestyle, and in their own way, recommends self-care for their viewers. For example, Cami uses self-care to deal with stress: "the last few weeks have been a little bit more stressful than usual [...] so I just wanted to take a day, and relax, and do all of the little things I need to do, and just self-care." Cami describes her self-care as essential for her stress relief, and thus conveys to viewers that it is essential to theirs as well. She looks forward to having a day to rest, catch up on little things, and take care of herself.

Diana sees self-care as a central piece of her mental health: "it is incredibly easy with the lives we live, and the stress that we go through every single week, to feel absolutely burnt out by the time the weekend comes 'round, I know that when it comes to self-care if I'm very busy I tend to make it a very low priority, which I shouldn't do so, I wanted to show you what I do on my self-care days, on my recharge, routine days, which is normally on Sunday, to reset the week to feel on top of life again." Diana feels like the stress and activity in her life rarely allow her to slow down and recover. She uses self-care to replenish herself. She understands that a lack of self-care prevents her from dealing with the pressures of everyday life. Diana views self-care as fundamental to her ideal functioning, and makes an effort to include regular self-care, whether or not she is perfect at it. Moreover, by using "we," Diana conveys the assumption that everyone's life is busy and stressful, again emphasizing the idea that self-care is thus essential for anyone.

Whereas Diana presented a more serious tone about the importance of self-care, Sara did not appear to be stressed or overworked, yet she also views self-care as central to her happiness, and throughout the vlog explicitly recommends self-care for her viewers. She is young and cheerful, she smiles and speaks quickly, makes casual eye contact, and plays with her hair: "A self-care day is super super needed if you're feeling like stressed or if you just want to like reset relax and be really happy, so today I'm gonna be doing a bunch of things that just make me feel so relaxed and happy." Megan, although not as bubbly and cheerful as Sara, agrees and says, "... sometimes you need these days of like

reflection, to be able to kind of like come back to your senses and realize like what's important in your life, and take time for like self-care..." Megan emphasizes self-care as an essential piece in her maintenance of normalcy. In these examples self-care is essential because it repairs damage caused by the stress of everyday life.

Influencers emphasize self-care as essential by what they say and show during their vlogs. They use positive language and activities to illustrate their self-care. They focus on understanding that self-care is essential for overall stress relief, feelings of contentment, and the maintenance of mental health. In addition, they use language to convey comradery with the viewer ("we") or explicitly recommend self-care, again emphasizing that self-care is essential for everyone.

***Subtheme (a) Don't Feel Guilty.*** Influencers remind their viewers not to feel guilty for taking the time they need. They use positive language when describing self-care and make it clear that everyone deserves to do self-care, whether they feel stressed or not. Katie says, "don't ever feel guilty for taking self-care days, because if this isn't healthy [points to her temple] none of this is going to be healthy [circular hand gesture away from herself]." Influencers highlight the value in taking care of yourself and encourage their viewers to understand that taking time for self-care does not imply laziness or lack of productivity. In fact, as will be discussed in the next subtheme, self-care is seen as a productive use of time, given the potential reward one receives from self-care activities.

***Subtheme (b) Create Habits That Support Self-Care.*** Influencers view self-care as purposeful behaviours that require practice. They present self-care as habitual actions that help you catch up on what needs to be done. They explain that the positive effects from engaging in self-care can provide encouragement to practice self-care regularly. In addition, influencers present self-care as a feed-forward system, where the good feelings they experience make other areas of their lives more enjoyable. They present the idea that if you prepare now and create habits that support your self-care (like setting aside time and finding activities that are right for you) you feel better in the long term. For influencers, habits of self-care are purposefully created, and they are productive; self-care is not lazy and must be explicitly worked on. This subtheme is explicit, evidenced by what the influencers say and show.

Leah explains that by structuring her time she is able to include a little bit of self-care more often, "I have to do some work everyday or check in with work in some way every single day [...] to not do that, I think I'd feel more stressed out at the end of the day." Leah understands that she feels better when she maintains a practical level of work. This level of work means that self-care can be included as an attainable goal and maintained regularly. Regular inclusion of self-care takes practice. When reflecting on her regular self-care practice, Diana says, "I feel like, a glow after I journal or meditate, and it took a long time for me to get there, so don't be discouraged if you try it and nothing happens for a while, it just takes time." Diana's habit of journaling and meditation took practice, but she is now able to include this self-care activity regularly.

Jasmine's self-care vlog documents her early exploration of self-care. Here the viewer watches as she begins to realize the benefits of habitual self-care. She shows the viewer parts of her day where she is engaged with work and explains that some of her days are so consumed with work that she does nothing else. She then documents time spent reading, doing yoga, journaling, and cooking. Jasmine knows that these activities make her feel good. She makes comments near the end of her week about how she will continue to include these small actions in the weeks to come. Thus, Jasmine depicts self-care as an activity that requires effort and work, but that will also reap substantial reward in exchange for that investment of time.

*Subtheme (c) Self-Care is Idiosyncratic.* This subtheme addresses the types of self-care activities influencers engaged in during their vlogs. They range along a continuum of restful, quiet, introspective behaviours like journaling, doing yoga, eating slowly, reading outside, and going to bed early; to active, energetic, and productive self-care behaviours, like working out, getting your nails done, doing your eyebrows, going grocery shopping, organizing a closet, and hanging new art. The level of activity from each influencer varies. For example, Cami encourages viewers to get moving, as she does, by "having a good stretch" in the morning. While Leah stands in her kitchen remarking on how she slept in "45 minutes longer." Danielle explains that she will stop vlogging for a bit while she watches TV, and a scene change from Katie results in her mentioning "I can't even lie, the past three hours I've just been sitting on the couch not doing anything at all." Influencer personalities and preference determine the types of self-care they engage in.

For example, self-care can be social. Several influencers choose to engage in a variety of positive social activities: Jasmine goes to a music festival with her friends; Danielle has coffee with her brother and supper with her dad; Cami goes out to the dog park; Leah drops a book off for a friend who is going out of town; and Anna spends time with her husband and attends a church service. Spending time with friends and family, and maintaining positive social relationships, are important pieces of self-care for these influencers.

Influencers encourage their viewers to see self-care as idiosyncratic. Megan encourages viewers to choose self-care activities they prefer and "hopes [this vlog] motivated you guys to [...] get out there and do some things for yourself this week, whether it's reading a book, going for a walk, working out, getting your nails done, getting your eyebrows done..." And Diana emphasizes the personal nature of self-care when she says, "If you had a crazy week and you want to have a cozy day go for it, if you want to dress up for yourself then go for that too, it's totally up to you..." Overall, influencers are explicit in their presentation that self-care is personal: doing what makes you feel good will depend on your preferences.

**Theme 2: Self-Care Requires Access and Privilege.** This theme addresses implicit messages in the self-care vlogs. Central to this theme is that influencers can practice self-care because they hold inherent advantages; engaging in the practices as recommended would require substantial privilege on the part of the viewer. It should be noted, however, that such accessibility and privilege is never explicitly discussed. The influencers are pretty, young, thin, and primarily White. Many show beautiful homes and neighbourhoods. They shop at expensive stores, use trendy and/or expensive products, and appear to have an abundance of time. Most of these influencers do not depict a job aside from YouTube or discuss needing to go to work. At the same time, the influencers speak conversationally, with causal eye contact and casual camera angles. That is, the casual approach to sharing their views belies the inherent privilege that would be required to regularly execute those views (e.g., racial privilege, ability to afford expensive products, time for hobbies and interests, including self-care). This combination of what they are saying, what they show, and how they show it normalizes their privilege. As will be discussed further with the subthemes of this category, influencers create a fantasy where

they have an unrealistic presentation of beauty, lifestyle and free time that is likely unavailable to the average person.

***Subtheme (a) Maintenance of Beauty Ideals for Women.*** The messages sent by influencers regarding self-care, when viewed with a critical eye, are consistent with (and thereby promote) traditional beauty ideals for women, including beliefs that are commonly associated with the diet industrial complex (Aubrey et al., 2020; Farrell, 2011). These are at odds with the goals of self-care. The distinct ways that influencers portray the maintenance of beauty ideals for women is about an implicit presentation of reward and punishment as it applies to "good" bodies versus "bad" bodies. For example, Dayna says, "I tell you, not spinning for four days will getcha. I think I just sweat my whole body out, that's not the thing, I definitely just sweat out all the hotdogs and chips and all the Memorial Day barbeque food, so I guess that's good." Dayna conforms to mainstream views of body expectations and the idea that women must "earn" "bad" foods, and if these bad foods are consumed, she must be "punished" with exercise. Often, influencers' implicit presentation of food normalizes body shaming, diet culture, and the mainstream ideal for women to be thin, pretty, and young. For instance, there are multiple examples of small, low calorie meals being held up as the standard, where other foods are framed as "comfort foods" or "cheat meals." Katie talks with her partner about the type of meal they want for supper. They decide to have a healthy meal, so they can "go ham tomorrow." "Junk" food is the reward for the healthy meals we eat, and workouts are the punishment for the junk food we consume.

Influencers' maintenance and presentation of their outward appearance in their vlogs is often expressed as synonymous with self-care. For example, Victoria is seen in a full length mirror wearing a black bralette and thong underwear, holding the camera while rubbing her stomach with a tanning mitt, turning slightly to show her tan/body, and making kissy lips in the mirror while she says "after" (i.e., showing her viewers what she looks like after the tan has developed). Given that self-care is idiosyncratic, this may genuinely be self-care for Victoria; however, the implicit message is, that the self, in self-care is portrayed as young, thin, and attractive, and that self-care activities should serve the purpose of achieving these ideals. Notably, this is consistent with the idea from Theme 1, subtheme (b), Create Habits to Support Your Self-Care, that self-care is a purposeful

activity designed to serve an end-goal. The implied nature of that end goal, in these vlogs, is to pursue the ideal body and lifestyle.

Another example of the ideal body can be seen when Cami first spends time casually speaking to the camera about movement as an important piece of self-care. In her vlog, we see her walk dramatically, creating waves in the shawl she is wearing, to a stylized, small studio room with floor to ceiling windows, bright light, and large potted plants on the floor. She picks up her yoga mat and drops the shawl to the floor. The camera moves around her as she goes through multiple yoga poses, focusing in on parts of her body and outfit, including the back details of her bra and leggings. Her long hair is down, she is thin, fit, and conventionally beautiful. While this may be self-care for Cami, the attention paid to her appearance reinforces the fantasy of self-care and the link between self-care, beauty, and beautiful locations.

In another example, viewers are presented with language and attitudes that self-care is more about body maintenance and less about self-care when Megan shows the camera her nails, "I wanna show you guys my nails I got dip like three weeks ago as you guys can see it's like super overgrown, so I need to get them done like they're actually so long it's freaking me out..." The camera switches to a view of her face and a close up of her eyebrows: "my eyebrows are so overgrown too, like underneath you can see them, so I'm gonna go get them threaded, and just like have a me day you know..." The actions that Megan will engage in are more for the maintenance of her appearance and less about self-care. Megan goes on to say that she wants to

"get everything done that I need to get done because I want to work out, but I feel like I can't work out until I do all these things, does that happen to you guys? I feel like until I get everything done that I need to do I can't, like do something, well, things that have to do with self-care like I have to get my nails done get my eyebrows done like get my shit together before I can like do anything else so that's exactly what I'm going to do today."

Self-care is not about replenishing herself anymore; it is about the maintenance of conventional beauty ideals. Moreover, although self-care is supposed to be activities designed to combat the effects of stress, and thus exercise would be a positive form of self-care, Megan cannot, in this example, even pursue her self-care until she has finished

maintaining her body (and notably maintaining it in line with an idealized version of beauty).

*Subtheme (b) Trendy, Expensive Lifestyle.* These vlogs contain shots of put together women in immaculately clean, stylized, and trendy spaces, homes, and vehicles, surrounded with expensive products, clothes, and food. For example, in Diana’s vlog the camera is stationary and there is a view of a very stylized, white, clean, bright, modern living room. She comes into view, sits down at the coffee table with a book and a pen. She opens the book, her profile in view while she writes. After closing the book, she looks off into the distance. “Write down 5 things you are grateful for today, and you will feel your mind shifting toward happiness” is displayed in writing across the screen. Diana creates an ideal fantasy out of her environment – at its most basic, the only items required to journal are paper and a pen; however, there is a great deal of time and money that go into creating a space that looks like it came out of a magazine. This unrealistic portrayal of an ideal style is likely not feasible for the average person.

Both Anna and Diana use a voyeuristic convention, where the camera is placed in a corner of a room and the influencer proceeds to move through this portion of their day without interacting with the camera. At the beginning of Diana’s vlog, the camera uses a wide angle with a full view of her bedroom. The viewer sees the blind down with light peeking around the sides, a stylized dreamcatcher above the bed, an all-white wall, a large full-length mirror, white dresser with flowers on top, a large plant in the corner, a tufted headboard, and pink and white blankets. Diana is laying in bed stretching, wearing a sweatshirt, her long, dark hair is down.

In Anna’s vlog, the camera shows a wide view of a bedroom. All white, styled, very feminine and pretty, bright light is streaming through closed blinds. There is a couple in bed, sleeping. Birds are singing, and light guitar music plays. The camera switches to a close shot as she stretches her arms out, sits up, reaches her arms overhead, and her bright overdubbed speaking begins, “Hello and welcome to my Sunday morning routine!” While she is speaking the angle changes wide again. Anna has gotten out of bed, turns to open the windows, and the viewer sees her wearing a white sweatshirt with a rainbow on the front, light pink leggings, and long, blond, wavy hair down. She wakes up her husband, they kiss, and the video continues.

This voyeuristic convention creates an illusion of authenticity. However, these shots are contrived, YouTube vlog conventions where the influencer plans, prepares, and edits the sequence in a way that fulfills the fantasy of waking up perfectly. Both Anna and Diana normalize this stylized portrayal of waking up. While waking up in a beautiful space is not inherently problematic, the ubiquity of these scenes, with their portrayal of perfect, privileged, expensive, trendy lifestyles, in the self-care vlogs reinforces the fantasy of self-care.

*Subtheme (c) Self-Care Day.* As mentioned, influencers emphasized that self-care is earned through hard work. They also emphasized that you should reward yourself with a full "self-care day". Diana mentions the topic of her vlog, "what I do on my self-care days [...] which is normally on Sunday," and Cassie says, "I like having like one of these days like once a week just to I don't know, relax and not have to work or really like stress about anything, I can kind of do whatever I want, so yeah, this is just one of those days, and I feel like having like a lazy day or like a personal day, every once in a while or like once a week, is like really important..." Influencers are explicit in their recommendations for viewers to do the same, however, the fantasy of self-care as an earned day is contrived. Only one influencer mentions that vlogging itself is work; by failing to mention vlogging as their work, influencers set a standard for self-care that they themselves do not attain. This creates unrealistic expectations about the time needed for self-care, highlighting the privilege that allows for a full day for self-care.

## DISCUSSION

Influencers use online space to describe, promote, and educate about a range of topics, including self-care. We explored online depictions of self-care and the use of self-care as a lay concept by considering what influencers say about self-care, how they say it, and what they show when discussing it. The ability of influencers to develop parasocial relationships with viewers (Chen, 2016) contributes to the importance of this research. As more people turn online for self-care information, and as people with positive self-care experiences want to share these, there is more space for influencers to discuss self-care. These parasocial relationships with influencers affect viewers' attitudes and opinions about self-care, potentially impacting their everyday realities of self-care.



We considered both the visual and verbal aspects of influencer-created, self-care focused vlogs. Our data set confirms that self-care is a concept that has moved from the medical and health professional literature (Dorociak et al., 2017; Dugan & Barnes-Farrell, 2020; Miller et al., 2019) to popular culture. Together, these vloggers have over 9.7 million subscribers, and at the time of data collection, these self-care vlogs had been viewed over 2.1 million times. Self-care is no longer an activity just for helping professionals, but rather an activity that any person can (and according to these vloggers, should) engage in. Moreover, as noted in the first theme, this activity is not for leisure or pleasure but rather essential for anyone's (and therefore everyone's) life. Although these influencers emphasize personal choice as important when engaging in self-care, taken together, our themes and subthemes provide a map – both explicitly stated and implicitly expressed – for how self-care should look.

However, as identified in our second theme, a substantial level of access and privilege is required to execute self-care as depicted by these influencers. The influencers use specific products, some of which are quite expensive. They engage in self-care plans that require a large investment of time (e.g., earning a “self-care day”) that are not accessible to most individuals who have other responsibilities, like employment and child-care. Individuals from impoverished backgrounds, in particular, would be unable to engage in this self-care. That is, self-care, as shown by these influencers, is not only required (Theme 1) but inaccessible to many (Theme 2). A large portion of individuals – all of whom should be engaging in self-care, according to the influencers – cannot execute self-care as presented by these vlogs. Thus, self-care as adopted by influencers appears to be another mechanism by which a set of privileged people can oppress another set of people while sending the message that this inaccessible activity is required for well-being (thus excluding a large population of people from well-being).

It is important when interpreting the implications of our results to remember that influencers are, in some ways, a modern form of advertising, whose purpose is to engage regular viewers by generating content that is effective at attracting and retaining these viewers (Mishra & Ismail, 2018; Wood, 2019). Influencers can make money from embedded advertisements, affiliate links, and discount codes, though unless disclosed by influencers, it is difficult to infer whether they are paid, or how lucrative this payment is.

As mentioned, influencers are a unique form of advertising because they have the potential to develop parasocial relationships in which the viewer feels as if the influencer is a real-life friend (Chen, 2016). Influencers may leverage this trust to promote sponsored products, brands, and activities. The resulting advertisement is less like a sales pitch and more like a recommendation from a friend.

This is nothing new in the advertising world: "it's about selling an idea to somebody, and appealing to who they think they are, and/or who they want to be, outside of the reality of themselves" (Duffy, 2017, p. 23-24). As influencers are essentially advertisers, they are a mechanism of capitalism. As such, our project demonstrates that self-care itself has become a "product" worth the attention of social media influencers, and thus self-care can be seen as a commodity. As previously discussed, it is also a commodity that not all can easily acquire, but that everyone should aspire to "own." If there are no exemptions from self-care (i.e., it is to be strived for by all), then there becomes an almost infinite number of consumers of the product.

Through this, influencers create a fantasy of self-care. This becomes problematic when presenting self-care online, since the messages influencers present become less about caring for themselves and more about adherence to consumerism and the diet-industrial complex (Farrell, 2011, p. 17). Parallels exist between advertising and diet culture and our analyses revealed that aspects of diet culture are disguised as self-care for women, particularly the maintenance of a certain body ideal. In their vlogs, the influencers might discuss minor challenges pursuing self-care (for example, Diana's difficulties getting into journaling as a habit) but generally make self-care appear as effortless. As Nagoski and Nagoski (2020) note, diet culture is just patriarchy and capitalism. Thus, it appears that self-care, as presented by these influencers, has become patriarchy and capitalism.

Consistent with this idea of "self-care capitalism" is the message given by these vloggers that self-care activities must be purposeful, goal-driven, and "earned" (although much of this message is implied, rather than explicitly stated). For example, Jackie felt tired after filming a cleaning video, so she rewarded herself with a self-care day filled with spa treatments; Megan presented self-care as activities to be completed (getting her nails and eyebrows done) before she could engage in something enjoyable (going to the gym);

and several other influencers referred to lists with self-care activities to complete (e.g., the viewer followed Victoria, Leah, and Sara as they checked items off of their self-care to do lists). The amount of work implied through this approach requires a degree of privilege (i.e., time and money).

### Strengths and Limitations

A particularly salient limitation of the research is the drastic speed of change on social media (Appel et al., 2020). Trends on social media move faster than research and publishing cycles. By the time something is published, there is a chance it is less relevant, or less accurately reflective of the current state of social media, and potentially broad cultural opinions of the topic. In addition to this, a limitation for researchers in general, is the need to make certain inferences due to the lack of transparency from social media websites.

This analysis is timely. As self-care becomes an expectation for everyone, and because of the integration of our online and offline lives (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Legewie & Nassauer, 2018; Mishra & Ismail, 2018), it is important to understand our impressions of self-care and how they continue to shift. As people turn online for health information, it is important to research YouTube, the second most used website on the Internet (Richter & Armstrong, 2019).

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