**Digital It Girls: An exploration into how Fashion Influencers use social media to acquire economic, cultural, and social capital and what they do with it.**

‘“It” is that quality possessed by some few persons which draws all others with its magnetic life force’ – Elinor Glyn, *“It”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

In the 1927 short story *“It”*, Elinor Glyn defines the concept in the vaguest of terms. Glyn’s writing introduced the idea of It to the masses, and the film adaptation that followed led to the creation of the It Girl archetype as its star, Clara Bow, is considered by many to be the first It Girl. Despite falling out of general use from the 1930s until the 1960s, the idea of the It Girl has endured. Any woman who has the title bestowed upon them gains an air of prestige and authority that is difficult to define. The It Girl of any moment is considered by many to be a tastemaker; people copy the way she dresses, how she cut her hair, the music she listens to, and any other aspect of her life that can be easily replicated. They represent an aspirational idea of what it is to be a woman. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on taste, this essay will present the argument that Fashion Influencers are the It Girls of the digital age, analyse how they use social media to generate economic, cultural, and social capital, and examine how what they do with this capital.

Social media influencers are people who ‘are vocational, sustained, and highly branded social media stars […] [who] attract and maintain a sizable following on their social media platforms through highly engaging and personalized [sic] content production’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Social Media Influencers can be considered an umbrella term, making Fashion Influencers a popular subcategory of it. Fashion Influencers align with the above definition, with all of their engaging and personalised content being about topics relating to the fashion world. While there are male Fashion Influencers, this essay will focus on female content creators as they dominate the genre. Content about fashion proves to be extremely popular on social media platforms that focus on visuals such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.[[3]](#footnote-3) A typical Fashion Influencer will post pictures of their outfit on Instagram, clothing haul videos on YouTube, and styling videos on TikTok; this content helps them amass thousands of followers. These followers then attempt to replicate what they see in these influencers content by purchasing the items featured in it, thus demonstrating their abilities as tastemakers and solidifying their It Girl status.

The influencer phenomenon may best be explained by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory that when someone is believed to have good taste, their status is elevated, setting them above the masses. Bourdieu wrote about what makes us believe someone has good taste in his work *Distinction*. Bourdieu was writing from a distinctly French perspective in the 1960s (when he conducted his research for the book), but the theories put forth in this work can still be applied to a global context in the age of social media.[[4]](#footnote-4) Bourdieu argued that the taste is ‘what brings together things and people that go together’ meaning that those who are seen to have elevated status compared to the masses will in turn be seen to have good taste.[[5]](#footnote-5) In order to achieve this elevated status, Bourdieu suggests that one must possess three forms of capitals: economic, cultural, and social.[[6]](#footnote-6) Economic capital being the wealth a person has access to. Cultural capital is the knowledge a person possesses. Social capital is related to who a person knows and what social group they belong to. Economic is arguably the primary form of capital, as without it one’s cultural and social capital would be meaningless. Bourdieu was writing about taste in the pre-social media age, but these qualifiers of taste can still be used to analyse the modern online landscape. The advent of social media has emphasised the importance of social capital. When people interact online they ‘make expressions of social capital that specifically affect and extend their relationships’ and demonstrate the social groups they belong to.[[7]](#footnote-7) This expression of social capital can in turn be converted into both cultural and economic capital; cultural capital is generated as it is an opportunity to share knowledge and economic capital is generated as being able to navigate the online world in 2022 is seen as a valuable skill. Social media allows users to ‘create the impression of being higher status than they actually are’.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the case of Fashion Influencers, their social media presence allows them to accumulate and display all three of these capitals: their social capital is their follower count, their cultural capital is their knowledge of the fashion industry, and their economic capital is wealth they collect and display via their chosen platforms.

In order to be a Fashion Influencer, and in turn a tastemaker/It Girl, a woman must possess all three forms of capital. These qualifications are not exclusive to the modern iteration of the It Girl, the woman of the moment from each decade has always possessed all three. This is illustrated when following a timeline of women who have been labelled It Girls in each decade. In the 1920s, Clara Bow’s economic capital was the wealth she generated from her films, her cultural capital was her knowledge of acting, and her social capital was her Hollywood connections. Edie Sedgwick repopularised the term in the 1960s; Sedgwick was born into wealth which gave her substantial economic capital, her cultural capital came from her artistic endeavours, and her social capital was her friendships with people like Andy Warhol and Bob Dylan. Similarly to Sedgwick, 1970s It Girl Jane Fonda was born with vast economic capital as her father was actor Henry Fonda, her acting and political activism generated cultural capital, and her social capital was the connections she amassed throughout her career. In the 1980s, the title was passed on to model and actress Brooke Shields. Shields career began when she was a child which led to her accumulating economic, cultural, and social capital at a young age. Kate Moss was the It Girl of the 1990s; Moss garnered economic capital through her work as a model, her cultural capital was her in-depth knowledge of the fashion industry, and her social capital was her romantic and platonic relationships with various celebrities. In the 2000s, Paris Hilton became the woman of the moment. Like many It Girls before her, Hilton was born into wealth and thus already had economic capital, in terms of cultural capital Hilton had numerous reality television shows and was always featured in tabloid publications, and her social capital was her friendships with people like Nicole Richie and Britney Spears. The 2010s was when the It Girl first went digital with the arrival of Instagram models like Kendall Jenner. Jenner had garnered substantial economic capital due to her familial connection to the Kardashians, cultural capital through her work in the fashion industry and on television, and social capital through her connections with other models, celebrities, and designers. These women share many similarities from their substantial wealth to the social groups they belong to, demonstrating how the It Girl archetype has simultaneously evolved yet remained consistent throughout the years. Following this timeline, the Fashion Influencer being the It Girl of the 2020s seems like a natural progression of the It Girl archetype, especially when the new role of social media within the fashion industry is considered.

Many people who work in the fashion industry claim that social media has changed the way clothes are made as they ‘need to photograph well to sell well’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Dr Agnès Rocamora has labelled this as the ‘mediatization’ (‘the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic’) of the fashion industry in the digital era.[[10]](#footnote-10) Contemporary fashion brands take social media into account for every decision they make; if they put on a fashion show they live stream it, the social media followings of people are taken into consideration before working with them, Fashion Influencers are invited to their events, and they are always thinking about how their products will look in social media posts. While fashion has always been intertwined with media, its relationship with social media is different; social media has led to the ‘democratization [sic] of fashion’ and turned it into a participatory medium.[[11]](#footnote-11) Social media means that the fashion industry often ‘create events with the main or sole purpose of being covered by the media’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Modern fashion brands curate their social media presence around the idea of getting people involved, and Fashion Influencers help them to bridge the gap between themselves as a business and the average social media user (i.e., potential customers). While the integration of Fashion Influencers into the industry appears to be democratising, and in many ways it is, that is not entirely true. The fashion industry has historically upheld and promoted rigid beauty standards of women being ‘young, slender, conventionally beautiful, abled bodied, and […] cisgender’.[[13]](#footnote-13) While there are popular Fashion Influencers who disrupt these ideals, the majority of them unknowingly uphold the industry’s standards. This means that by collaborating with Fashion Influencers brands are able to continue abiding by their archaic ideals while giving the appearance of being more open.

As previously stated, fashion content on social media is a genre dominated by female creators. Studies have shown that young women are more likely to use the internet for ‘information gathering and communicating with others’ than their male counterparts.[[14]](#footnote-14) With this in mind, women’s prevalence in the worlds of fashion and social media influencing appears to be the natural order of things. Many Fashion Influencers only previous experience with the fashion industry is as a fan or observer but social media opens the door for them to participate in the industry.[[15]](#footnote-15) They ‘capitalize on social media’s supposed qualities of authenticity’ by cultivating relationships with their followers that feel intimate.[[16]](#footnote-16) People who follow Fashion Influencers feel connected to them because they are generally around the same age and share common interests. These young women use their social media platforms to create ‘comfortable spaces’ for their followers to discuss their love of fashion with people who feel like ‘trusted peers’ by posting content which idealises the way they live.[[17]](#footnote-17) This is clearly illustrated by examining the social media presence and career of It Girl Emma Chamberlain, a popular Fashion Influencer who has cultivated a dedicated and passionate fanbase.

Emma Chamberlain began posting YouTube videos in 2017 and has amassed over 20 million followers across various social media platforms since then. As of April 2022, Chamberlain’s YouTube channel has 11.4 million subscribers, her Instagram has 15.3 million followers, and before she deleted her TikTok in December of 2021 she had accumulated over 10 million followers on the app. Since the beginning of her career as an influencer, Chamberlain has posted videos about fashion, with her first YouTube video being titled ‘City Inspired Lookbook 2017’.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the intervening years, Chamberlain has gone from posting styling videos to working with high end brands like Louis Vuitton and fashion publications like Vogue. Chamberlain has been labelled as Gen-Z’s It Girl not only by her fans, but by the media too, and her ability to influence fashion trends is regularly discussed by fashion publications along with her ‘bold approaches to dressing’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The content Chamberlain posts on social media demonstrates her economic, cultural, and social capital.

Born on May 22nd, 2001, in San Bruno, California Chamberlain grew up in a middle-class family and attended private Catholic schools.[[20]](#footnote-20) This places Chamberlain in the demographic of people who grew up with easy access to the internet as they are ‘most frequently’ middle-class.[[21]](#footnote-21) Her background and the business ventures she has embarked on throughout her career (she runs a coffee brand called Chamberlain Coffee, is creative director for the beauty brand Bad Habits, and is a Louis Vuitton brand ambassador) means Chamberlain has accumulated considerable economic capital, which can be seen in her social media posts. Chamberlain has discussed her background on her YouTube channel and in her Podcast, *Anything Goes,* and she regularly posts about Chamberlain Coffee, Louis Vuitton, and Bad Habits along with the various sponsorship deals on her Instagram.

Knowledge of the fashion industry is cultural capital for a Fashion Influencer, and Chamberlain is no different. Chamberlain’s is able to display this on social media through vlogs of her shopping or styling clothes, posts about attending fashion events, and discussing her own style in interviews. In her Instagram posts, Chamberlain typically tags the designers/brands of the clothes she is wearing which further demonstrates her knowledge of fashion. In 2021, Chamberlain hosted the red-carpet interviews for *Vogue* at the Met Gala, a prestigious event in the fashion industry. Videos of Chamberlain’s interviews with various celebrities provided her with a platform to display her knowledge of the industry (cultural capital) but also further demonstrated the vast social capital she has amassed through her career as a Fashion Influencer.

Chamberlain’s social capital is further illustrated through her social media posts from various fashion events she is invited to. These events are attended by fellow influencers and demonstrates that Chamberlain is part of an exclusive social group not many people have access to. Chamberlain has also appeared on popular podcasts, been the subject of Vogue YouTube videos, and articles are frequently published about her online. Her friendships with fellow Fashion Influencers like Devon Carlson and her relationship with popular musician Role Model (Tucker Pillsbury) solidify her elevated social status in the eyes of her followers.

Examining the displays of Chamberlain’s various forms of capital on social media allows us to understand how the Fashion Influencer is the most recent evolution of the It Girl archetype. Chamberlain’s abilities as a tastemaker can be seen in the way her fans take inspiration from what she wears, and articles written about her with headlines like ‘The One Thing Every Gen Z’er Wears Because of Emma Chamberlain’ claiming that when Chamberlain posts herself wearing a new item of clothing ‘everyone’ goes out and buys it too.[[22]](#footnote-22) Her social media profiles present her followers with a lifestyle they can aspire to. The content she posts gives them the impression that if they buy the right clothes, socialise with the right people, and know the right information they can be just like their favourite It Girl. Emma Chamberlain, and all Fashion Influencers like her, promote the idea of social mobility through consumption.

As Bourdieu theorised, if someone is perceived to have elevated status, they are in turn seen to have good taste. Fashion Influencers’ followers view them as high-status individuals, and so they attempt to replicate their lifestyles themselves in hopes of eventually becoming high status themselves. This behaviour is only further encouraged through the relationships Fashion Influencers cultivate with their fanbases; Social media influencers like Chamberlain post content that invites their followers to ‘vicariously participate’ in their everyday lives.[[23]](#footnote-23) This creates a sense of intimacy on the part of the follower as they feel as if they know the influencer personally. While this relationship is largely one sided, it has a considerable impact on the follower. The impact Fashion Influencers have over people can be seen in the ‘homogeneity’ of the social media profiles and behaviours of their followers.[[24]](#footnote-24) In an attempt to capture the It factor they see in their favourite influencers content they wear the same clothes, they listen to the same music, they read the same books, and they repeat the same talking points they’ve heard influencers say. They feel connected to these young women and as a result they are ‘motivated and unknowingly made to think in the same frame as presented by the influencer’.[[25]](#footnote-25) When a social media user interacts with a Fashion Influencer’s content, this creates a ‘filter bubble’, meaning that a platform will continue to recommend similar content to them.[[26]](#footnote-26) The filter bubble creates a highly personalised feed for the user, reducing the diversity of the content they consume. This means that most of the content they are seeing on social media reinforces the ideas put forth by the influencers they follow and leading them to believe that this is the right way of thinking. It ‘fosters confirmation bias’.[[27]](#footnote-27) This gives these digital It Girls power over their followers; they can determine how these young people spend their money, the kind of media they consume, and even their opinions on serious matters like politics and social issues. The apparent closeness of their relationships with their followers ‘enhances’ their dependence on them.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Young People nowadays are drawn to Fashion Influencers because they embody the It factor Elinor Glyn wrote about in her short story almost a century ago. They represent an idealised version of how ‘contemporary bodies are supposed to look and act’.[[29]](#footnote-29) The content Fashion Influencers post invites their followers into their lives, making them feel closer to us than a celebrity would. They give human faces to luxurious and glamourous lifestyles just like the It Girls who came before them but the intimate relationships they have created with their followers makes it feel attainable. Their followers see them as a sort of cultural teacher, and they guide them on how they should dress, how to act, and what kind of people they should associate themselves with. Following an influencer is the first step on a person’s journey to being perceived to have good taste. Fashion Influencers have the power to shape the minds of the millions of people who follow them. People look to them for guidance on how they should live their lives and the things they need to surround themselves with in order to fit in. They become reliant on their one-sided friendships with these social media stars, only making decisions they feel would fit into the aestheticized version of life that an influencer posts on their platforms. Social media has become an omnipresent part of everyday life, meaning that the power Fashion Influencers have over the masses will only continue to grow. The everchanging nature of modern media means that Fashion influencers are just the latest iteration of the It Girl archetype, and there appears to be no end in sight as to where their influence could go next.

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Declaration of Ownership: I declare that the attached work is entirely my own and that all sources have been acknowledged: X

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