**“Inspired by real life”: Examining ‘aspirational realness’ on the websites of *Glossier* and *Maryam Nassir Zadeh***

The permeable boundary between ‘real life’ and its depiction online has fascinated scholars since digital connectivity was first extended to consumers in the early 1990’s. In recent years, a number of fashion and beauty brands have developed digital interfaces that deliberately blur this boundary, circulating an aspirational quality imbued with relatable and unstudied cool around their brands. This is achieved in a number of ways: the models shot for their campaigns and product images are cast from Instagram or are friends of the designers; these images are shot documentary-style, on the street or in extreme close-up, revealing squinting, blemishes, freckles, and stray hairs. Yet rather than overturning the aesthetic ideal that is the stock in trade of the fashion photograph, these stylistic choices foreground the casual beauty of the women shot and the off-kilter charm of the products they wear.

This paper will examine two distinct brands that both generate this quality of (what I have dubbed) ‘aspirational realness’ around their products: beauty brand *Glossier* (glossier.com) and fashion retailer *Maryam Nassir Zadeh* (mnzstore.com), both of which are based in New York City. I will argue that both of these brands employ a style of shooting their product that harks back to fashion photography of the 1990’s, which also prioritised the fresh glamour of ordinary people, whilst communicating discourses of feminine independence in a distinctly millennial context. In what ways can we understand this ‘aspirational realness’ as a reaction against the airbrushed polish of social media sites and celebrity-saturated visual culture? How do these brands circulate discourses of female camaraderie whilst also generating an aura of unapproachable coolness around their models and the products they display?

I will study how these competing discourses are generated through the words and images of these two websites, considering them in light of scholarship on the ‘real’ in fashion photography, the ‘fashion gaze’, and by considering Joseph Roach’s essay on the phenomenon of ‘It’ (2004).

**Bio**

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The power of interpellation is not lost at Glossier. The chipper greeting in the website’s ’About Us’ section reads ‘hi, welcome to Glossier!’ We’re laying the foundation for a beauty movement that celebrates real girls, in real life… beauty should be fun, easy, imperfect, and personal. Above all, we believe that you give life to products- products don’t breathe life into you.’