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Mrs Hinch, the rise of the cleanfluencer and the neoliberal refashioning of housework: Scouring away the crisis?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Emma Casey**

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Abstract

This article extends sociological and feminist accounts of housework by examining the social significance of the rise of the ‘cleanfluencer’: online influencers who supply household cleaning and organization tips and modes of lifestyle aspiration via social media. We focus on ‘Mrs Hinch’; aka Sophie Hinchliffe from Essex, the ‘homegrown’ Instagram star with 4.1 million followers who shares daily images and stories of cleaning and family life, and has a series of bestselling books, regular daytime TV appearances and supermarket tie-ins. We argue that, within neoliberal culture, housework is now often refashioned as a form of therapy for women’s stressful lives: stresses that neoliberalism and patriarchy have both generated and compounded. The argument is developed through three sections. First, we locate Mrs Hinch in relation to longer classed, gendered and racialized histories of domestic labour and the figure of the ‘housewife’, and the re-writing of domestic narratives to find new ways of ensuring women’s willingness to participate in unpaid domestic labour. Second, we analyse the contradictions of cleanfluencing as a form of ‘digital identity labour’ representing offline housework, which in this case is precarious and classed. Finally, drawing these themes together, we show how ‘Hinching’ recasts housework as part of a neoliberal therapeutic promise to ‘clean away’ the instabilities, anxieties and threats of contemporary culture.

Keywords

cleanfluencer, cleaning, housework, influencer, neoliberalism

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Introduction

Let's release some of that anxiety and worry with a good solid cleaning sesh! (Hinch, 2020b)

Mrs Hinch is the persona of Sophie Hinchliffe, a former hairdresser from Essex in England who started her own Instagram account in March 2018. The account, @mrshinchhome, is separate to her 'private' Instagram account and is dedicated to displaying various aspects of her at-home life. It features a combination of photographs of the interior of her very clean grey and white home and regular – usually daily – short Instagram video 'Stories'. Together these depict a light-hearted yet loving cultivation of domestic cleanliness, and feature a mixture of cleaning and top brand tips (for example, the best products for removing mould or getting laundry to smell fresh), jokey accounts of her daily household routine, comedy names for her cleaning equipment, pictures of her dog and baby, and self-acceptance quotes. The account also regularly features recent consumer bargain purchases ('Hinch Hauls' or 'bargs'), and money-saving tips, such as cleaning windows with washing-up liquid or sinks with bicarbonate of soda.

After her Instagram account became very popular in a short space of time – 4.1 million followers at the time of writing – Mrs Hinch became a celebrity on and beyond social media. She has appeared as a guest on BBC breakfast radio and TV talk shows like *This Morning* and *Loose Women*; in newspapers and magazines such as *Hello!*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *Sunday Times*; and has been referenced in British prime-time TV soap operas *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*.¹ In addition, Mrs Hinch has secured advertising deals with multinational corporations including Procter & Gamble and has collaborated with major British supermarket chains including Tesco, who in 2021 released a range of Hinch-branded merchandise including mugs, tea-towels and candlesticks, and Asda, who devoted prime end-of-aisle space to a promotion of Hinch-branded cleaning products, including large cut-out 1950s-style illustrations of her doing the laundry.² These affiliations associate the 'Mrs Hinch' persona with popular rather than 'posh' culture: with upper-working and lower-middle-class aesthetics. The Hinch persona and brand has been further developed through several bestselling books including memoirs and guidebooks (Mrs Hinch, 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

Mrs Hinch's Instagram account demonstrates her status as both an influencer *par excellence* and as what has recently become known as a 'cleanfluencer'. Leaver et al. (2020) define an influencer as a person with a high follower-to-following ratio on social media (often Instagram, sometimes Facebook and increasingly on TikTok) who has made the move from personal to 'business' account, making use of advertorials and 'paid partnerships' (p. 107). Crucially, influencers have a wide online sphere of influence, often functioning as what Rojek and Baker call 'lifestyle gurus' who most commonly use their position to generate revenue through branding and promotion (Rojek & Baker, 2020). In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of female influencers on Instagram who not only offer tips and advice to their followers but also advertise products intended to help facilitate the various domestic labour practices (cooking, cleaning, washing, childcare) that have historically been performed predominantly by women. The term 'cleanfluencer' therefore indicates an influencer who shares content about cleaning (Mahdawi, 2019).

The *neoliberal* context of these social dynamics – social media, everyday domestic life, new modes of entrepreneurialism and gendered self-fashioning – is key. As a large body of literature has explored at length, neoliberalism functions by relentlessly interpolating us as individuals who need to strive on a competitive basis to survive, whilst socialized public safety nets are relentlessly slashed and marketized (Brown, 2015; Fraser, 2013; Wilson, 2016). There is therefore a far greater burden of responsabilization placed on the socially underprivileged or disadvantaged to ‘succeed’ via entrepreneurial forms of self-help (Littler, 2018). Such neoliberal rationalities profoundly shape gendered, classed and racialized modes of subjectivity and forms of self-fashioning (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Gilbert, 2016; McRobbie, 2020; Rottenberg, 2018; Wilson & Chivers Yochim, 2017). In this article we show how older relationships between gender and housework are being recast, under neoliberalism, in order to present it as a satisfying and achievable solution for multiple problems. We argue that a ‘therapeutic promise’ of cleaning is being fashioned: one which both has a simultaneously enabling and disabling practice in relation to class and which ramifies gendered inequalities.

Our analysis was conducted via a non-participative study of @mrshinchhome, a dedicated ‘business and work’ Instagram account separate to Sophie Hinchliffe’s private personal account. Although the number of Instagram ‘cleanfluencing’ accounts has increased dramatically over the past few years, we chose to focus on Mrs Hinch because she has significantly more followers (4.1 million) and a wider popular appeal than any similar cleanfluencer account, yet has received scant academic attention. Given that the @mrshinchhome account is high profile, public and regularly features in mainstream media, we use her Instagram profile name throughout. Our data collection focused on an analysis of posts and stories on @mrshinchhome between January 2020 and January 2021, when we watched Mrs Hinch’s daily stories and less frequent ‘posts’ (about one per month). We also analysed Mrs Hinch’s TV and radio interviews, commercials and published books to date. In this article we focus on stories which most closely related to the themes of the research, particularly around commerce, cleaning rituals and self-help. Adopting a ‘critical visual analysis’ approach (Schroeder, 2006) we explore the *subject matter* (cleaning); *form* (music, bodies, cleaning products); *medium* (digital/Instagram); *style* (relatable, achievable, intimate, everyday); and *genre* (‘housework’, ‘cleanfluencing’). We examine both the labour process around aesthetic production and the discourses surrounding the gendered, raced and classed construction of cleaning.

We develop our argument across three interconnected sections. First, we locate ‘Mrs Hinch’ in relation to longer histories and theories of housework in and around sociology and political and feminist theory. We show how Mrs Hinch is part of a larger formation in which domestic narratives are being refashioned as part of a much older script: one seeking to find new ways of ensuring women’s willingness to participate in unpaid household labour, both before and during Covid-19. Second, we analyse the classed and gendered contradictions of ‘cleanfluencing’ as an *online* labour practice representing *offline* domestic work. We show that it combines precarious forms of digital ‘self-branding’ (Hearn, 2017) with the gendered fetishization of domestic labour: a process we dub ‘spectacular housewifization’. Finally, drawing these themes together, and extending our main argument, we analyse how ‘Hinching’ recasts cleaning as therapy to ‘clean away’ some of the instabilities, difficulties and threats of contemporary neoliberal culture.

‘Love in a loveless world’: Capitalism, colonialism and the unpaid labour of women

To understand both contemporary online cleanfluencers and the social role offered by Mrs Hinch, we need to attend to the complex gendered, raced and classed histories of housework. Early feminist accounts of domestic labour drew connections between the emergence of capitalist economies via the industrial revolution and the consolidation of the emerging figure of the ‘housewife’. Maria Mies (1986) argued that the ‘good’ and ‘virtuous’ housewife emerged at the centre of colonialism and capitalism, with the free labour she provided being central to a new ‘private’ arena of family and ‘love’: separate, yet vital, to the masculine ‘public’ realm of production and accumulation. As Mies puts it, the parallel and interconnected processes of industrialism and colonialism resulted in a new highly gendered private arena of domesticity in the Global North, whereby ‘the Little White Man also got his “colony”, namely, the family and a domesticated housewife’ (p. 110).

The subordination of the housewife within patriarchal capitalism that Mies describes is a longstanding strand of left critique. For Frederick Engels, the confinement of women to domestic labour marked ‘the world historical defeat of the female sex’ (Engels, 2010, p. 10) and feminist theories of patriarchy and capitalism argued that housewives were being relegated to a class below their husbands (Delphy, 1984, Walby, 1989). In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir took aim at housework as part of the trap of domestic femininity (de Beauvoir, 1949). Railing against what she saw as the suffocating bourgeois expectations of women as ‘dutiful daughters’ and her own struggle against the ‘revolting fate’ of her sex, she positions housework as torturously repetitive and inane; stunting the self through endless, ubiquitous domestic routines and rituals that ultimately offer ‘no escape from immanence and little affirmation of individuality’ (p. 470).³

De Beauvoir’s contention that housework stifles the emergence of an ‘independent self’ and is deeply unfulfilling and exploitative chimes with later second-wave feminist work exploring the psychosocial effects of rigid gendered divisions of labour. Sheila Rowbotham (1973), for example, presented housework as a form of exploitative, oppressive and predominantly invisible labour, with any sense of achievement disappearing almost instantly the moment the task is accomplished (p. 70). In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan describes how the white middle-class women of her 1960s study were seduced by a bombardment of images of the ‘happy housewife heroine’; being a ‘career woman’ became a ‘dirty word’ (Friedan, 1964, p. 60) and in a world of increasing freedom and possibilities, women turned to ‘housework and rearing children’, living ‘according to an image that makes them deny the reality of the changing world’ (p. 59). A key feature of these postwar normative notions of domestic femininity was the conspicuous display of new consumer durables and rituals (Casey & Martens, 2007) targeted to middle-class white women in particular: the ‘cult of domesticity’ did not apply equally to all women (Davis, 1981).

Whilst they do not always agree on the solution to the problem, the point that social reproduction, or the reproduction of the social world, has depended on the marginalized and unpaid labour of women has been a focus of theorization and activism for left feminists since second-wave feminism onwards (Bhattacharya, 2017; Davis, 1981; Federici,

2012; Segal, 2017).⁴ These lines of enquiry were extended in more thoroughly sociological fashion by Ann Oakley, who, in her groundbreaking 1974 study of women and housework, noted the stark similarity between the monotony of many of the tasks associated with housework and the assembly-line work described by other scholars (Oakley, 2018). The key contribution of Oakley's study, and of the more mass-market book, *Housewife*, that she published the same year (1974), was to conceptualize housework as *work*. This is important because historically, housework was not seen as work or labour at all, despite the similarities between paid and unpaid domestic labour (Oakley, 1974/1985, p. 26).

Alongside reading housework as alienation and exploitation, there is a literature emphasizing how women have actively created networks and communities of support through their domestic labour and lives. For example, as Alison Clarke (2001) notes, 1950s Tupperware parties provided a space for women to nurture friendships. Indeed, popular narratives of housework have often been underpinned by a reflection of its shared and communal pleasures, with second-wave feminist scholars registering the 'affective' dimensions of domestic labour and noting how cultures of housework are communicated between women (Rowbotham, 1973, p. 80). As we show in this article, online cleanfluencer communities similarly provide spaces for the pursuit of shared experiences, humour, friendship and expression alongside gendered exploitation.

An important part of the pleasure of cleanliness and the homemade is the ways in which they represent love, care and familial wellbeing as part of a 'moral obligation' to the family (Oakley, 1974/1985). From this perspective, the 'self', femininity, personal value and the affirmation of others are reflected in the home and family and in particular in the display of objects in the home (Rowbotham, 1973, p. 76). Rather than just being a 'job' to be done, domestic labour thus becomes part of who *you are*; a 'craft' in cleanliness and shine with 'fetishistic qualities' (p. 78) although with, Rowbotham writes, one consequence being 'neurosis', obsession and constant housework.

Part of the fetishistic qualities and the 'unsuspected joys' of domestic labour lies in enduring notions of aesthetic appeal, particularly the sights, tastes and smells associated with specific domestic tasks (Pink, 2004), as the following quote from Beverley Cassara's 1962 text *American Women* exemplifies:

. . . the delectable smell of her own bread as it emerges crisp and brown from the oven, and the satisfaction of stitching up a new print dress on her own sewing machine . . . the smell of fresh earth in her own backyard. (Cassara, 1962, p. 25; cited in Oakley, 1974/1985, p. 41)

In this article we situate cleanfluencing and Mrs Hinch in relation to these notions, established in feminist scholarship, of domestic labour as monotonous, oppressive and responsible for intensifying feelings of anxiety; and alongside this as pleasurable, affective and meaningful. Cleaning is repositioned in cleanfluencing as alleviating and soothing, we argue, rather than intensifying or provoking anxious feelings. As Martens and Scott (2005) consider in their study of historical representations of cleaning in *Good Housekeeping* magazine, early twentieth-century cleaning products were increasingly and deliberately marketed to create anxieties that could be alleviated via purchasing a product designed to directly address that anxiety. The popular disinfectant product *Zoflora*, for example, launched in the UK in 1922, arguably owes its popularity to its

promise of simultaneously combating germs while also combating ‘unpleasant odours’, protecting children and helping to induce sleep, as the following from a 1951 *Zoflora* advertisement demonstrates:

But germs never sleep! Frequent mist-sprayed Zoflora destroys airborne germs in the nursery, induces untroubled sleep. Its powerful antiseptic properties dispel unpleasant odours and leave a safer, cleaner atmosphere.

The task of rendering the domestic sphere a space of safety became central to the role of the housewife, who was tasked with navigating her way through a growing plethora of domestic products that promised an ability to combat the ‘dangers’ of germs and dirt (Martens & Scott, 2006). As Judith Williamson remarked in 1988, products are ‘wheeled out’ as a solution to a ‘problem’ whereby ‘the product itself defines the problem it claims to solve’ (p. 225).

How exactly does Mrs Hinch fit into this landscape of theorizations of domestic labour? In many ways, Mrs Hinch offers a spectacular, contemporary refashioning of a longstanding image of the British housewife who is primarily responsible for the domestic labour in her own home. Her persona is geographically marked, classed and racialized in quite specific ways. The ‘everyday’ routines and rituals displayed on her account reflect a version of the ‘UK everyday’; one oriented around white, working/lower-middle-class, ‘respectable’ yet accessible and relatable suburban femininity. Mrs Hinch is extremely femme, usually heavily made-up, distinctly heterosexual and, as her name reminds us, extremely married. In many ways she is immediately recognizable as part of a long line of housewives who laboured all day to ensure their homes and children were ready to welcome their husbands from work in the evenings and whose image became a physical representation of the home (Martens & Scott, 2006), reproducing a conservative femininity.

Yet this cleaning persona also has to be understood in the context of a neoliberal culture in which, as Nancy Fraser puts it, the dual-income household has been held up since the 1980s as a middle-class norm (Fraser, 2013) and in which time-pressured middle-classes have been encouraged to outsource domestic labour to part-timer cleaners, many of whom are badly paid (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003). Mrs Hinch can be understood in this context, and by contrast, as offering a form of digital pedagogy for people who do *not* employ domestic cleaners: who need, or want to learn, how to do it themselves. In these terms it can also be understood as offering an updated form of working-class feminine domestic ‘respectability’ (Skeggs, 1997, p. 201).

Mrs Hinch lightens the domestic load and broadens her appeal by injecting humour into her stories and never ‘taking herself too seriously’. Throughout her books, interviews and Instagram account, the word ‘housework’ is rarely used. Instead, cleaning, tidying and ‘homemaking’ are presented as a process of creating a cosy, safe and welcoming space of sanctuary for the whole family and are either humorously reframed as ‘Hinching’ and sometimes described as ‘cleaning’, but hardly ever as ‘housework’. This reframing works to reinvent housework as appealing via promises of ‘happiness’ and ‘satisfaction’. In later sections we explore how this levity is integrated into the presentation of housework as a coping strategy: as a therapeutic means for self-fulfilment and as a balm for the soul.

We might view Mrs Hinch, then, like the wider terrain of ‘cleanfluencing’ more generally, which is overwhelmingly female, as yet another new way of ensuring women’s willingness to participate in unequal and unpaid domestic labour. Mr Hinch very rarely appears with a mop in his hand. And this spectacular dramatization of domestic routines, this new spin on and reboot of the idea that domestic labour is, above all, *woman’s work*, is to a significant extent achieved through the powerful forces of digital media, to which we turn next.

Digital identity labour and spectacular housewifization

I have never been motivated by money . . . What’s most important to me is being true to myself and authentic.

The truth is, I’m just being me! (Hinch, 2020b, p. 309)

Mrs Hinch and cleanfluencers can usefully be located in relation to the longer histories of housework and social reproduction outlined above. But there is also clearly another regime of labour at work: the labour of the online influencer; a form of work which is based around (if not solely performed in) the digital realm. In this section we explore the workings of ‘digital identity labour’, theorizing how it operates and discussing the contradictions that emerge when it is conducted in tandem with spectacularly gendered forms of housework.

In 1990 the American feminist artist Barbara Kruger produced a black, white and red artwork featuring a woman holding a magnifying glass overlaid with words typed in huge font: ‘It’s a small world – but not if you have to clean it.’⁵ Kruger’s striking artwork was an acerbic comment on how the feminized work of cleaning cultivates neither power nor a broad range of social connections or capital. As a highly successful ‘cleanfluencer’, Mrs Hinch in effect flips this message. In contrast to the strapline ‘it’s a small world – but not if you have to clean it’, for Mrs Hinch, ‘it’s a big world’ because she has cleaned it on Instagram in front of her 4.1 million followers. By performing domestic labour on social media, she has accrued sizeable media and economic power and social capital.

Mrs Hinch has been able to accrue these forms of power in part because female bodies – and particularly young, white, heteronormatively attractive bodies – have been the favoured subjects of Instagram, which has become virtually synonymous with new norms of femininity (Chen & Kanai, 2021). In the process young women are caught in a double bind of visibility: as it also facilitates an intense and pressurized scrutiny of female bodies (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dobson, 2015). Ros Gill’s recent interview-based report on gender on social media shows how young women ‘feel under intense pressure to look perfect and present a perfect life’: pressures which, whilst regularly navigated with sophistication, make many ‘anxious and depressed’ (Gill, 2021, p. 5). In the case of Mrs Hinch, the images of cleaning are mediated through Sophie Hinchliffe’s make-up and body as well as the platform. Her look is polished, shifting between special occasion finery and everyday quasi-glamorous comfort. Her tattoos and her voice show she is not ‘posh’ but ‘ordinary’, or ‘nouveau working-class’ as the right-wing newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* recently put it in its recent classification of domestic interior tribes (2021).⁶ Mrs Hinch presents a polished and glamorous image, reinforcing a stay-at-home

domestic ideal, which as Orgad and de Benedictis have argued (2015) can be valorized so long as it is distinguished from the image of the lower-working-class, benefits-claiming mother. Hinch constantly insists, in line with ideas around an achievable and accessible lower-middle-class femininity, on her everyday *normalcy*, what Crystal Abidin has called ‘calibrated amateurism’ (Abidin, 2018, p. 92; see also Turner, 2010 on ‘demotic celebrity’).

The most successful influencers like Mrs Hinch use their digital platforms effectively to simultaneously present ‘being yourself’ whilst seamlessly integrating product sponsorship into their stories. A brand ambassador for Procter & Gamble – makers of Febreze air freshener and Flash bathroom and kitchen cleaner which regularly feature in her stories – Mrs Hinch also has paid partnerships with household brands including Minky sponges, the British bargain chainstore B&M, Pampers nappies and Shark vacuums (Hinch, 2020b, p. 247). As the quotes at the beginning of this section exemplify, a key feature of the Mrs Hinch account is the continued downplaying and rejection of her influencer status and the ways in which the integration of product placement and promotion into stories of ‘ordinary’ domestic life must appear natural and unstaged. Crucially, influencers need to be seen to be making an ‘honest recommendation’ of a product via their personal, documented experience of using it (see also Leaver et al., 2020).

Different layers of Mrs Hinch’s ‘identity’, or her persona, are therefore simultaneously created and ‘revealed’ across a range of media, outwards from her own social media feed and then across a wider range of texts and platforms. We can relate this digital identity work to Arlie Hochschild’s idea of ‘emotional labour’, which famously theorized how capitalist service sector occupations involve a process of commodification: one that requires particular emotions to be performed at work and which partially estranges people from their own feelings (Hochschild, 2012). Similarly, the work of the influencer, as exemplified by Mrs Hinch, can usefully be understood as ‘digital identity labour’, in which the identity of the self is crafted, commoditized and monetized for profit. It can be related to recent work on the affective form of influencer labour; for instance, Mari Lehto (2021) draws attention to the rise of the ‘neurotic influencer’ who shares her ‘performative anxiety and vulnerability’ (p. 11), arguing this has become a central tactic to lifestyle influencers, aiding increased visibility.

The digital identity labour constructing ‘Mrs Hinch’ starts on Instagram and expands through other media, often through ‘churnalism’ (Lewis et al., 2008). For instance, tabloid newspaper *The Sun* has a range of sizeable articles which simply relate the contents of single Instagram stories (e.g. Cliff, 2021). Mrs Hinch’s books are presented as offering an insight into the ‘back stage’ of this media construction: detailing the free gifts she has been offered and how she disposes of them; how she learnt marketing, advertising codes and dealing with trolls. ‘I hope that’s helped pull back the curtain and make a little sense of what I admit is a very strange industry indeed’, she writes in a chapter of *This is Me* entitled ‘How the Industry works’ (Mrs Hinch, 2020b). Whilst much is omitted, the book presents itself as informally revealing her labour as an influencer. This Goffman-esque construction of the polished vs ‘informal’ self is echoed on Instagram, where there is distinction between the more static, polished photographs (front stage) versus the ephemeral back-stage ‘Stories’ which last 24 hours before disappearing (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 112). It participates in a wider trend amongst Instagram users whereby photographs are posted

infrequently and stay on the feed indefinitely, whereas the Stories – a complex series of images and short videos, often with music and quotes overlaid, with her voice addressing us informally ('hey guys!') – are far more frequent. Thus, as with so many media representations of celebrities, we are encouraged through expanding layers of mediation to feel that we are getting closer to 'the real' Sophie Hinchliffe and her emotions (Dyer, 1998; Littler, 2015), a process exacerbated through the 'accessibility, availability, presence and connectiveness' of social media (Raun, 2018, p. 99).

Mrs Hinch then is performing housewifery relentlessly on her Instagram feed whilst actually also being engaged in a wide range of other forms of work. The non-housework labour is shown through glimpses. The longest glimpses are given to the loyal followers who are engaged enough to buy not simply books of lists and advice, but the memoir. In it we learn she has earned enough from social media and books to support her family; and enough for her husband to take a five-year career break (Hinch, 2020b, p. 117). Performing housewifery on digital media actually enables her to be the breadwinner. This presents a contradiction: Mrs Hinch has become the breadwinner whilst occupying and fetishizing the role of non-earning housewife. In other words, gender roles rooted in a mid-twentieth-century Fordist ideal – in which middle-class men were breadwinners and women housekeepers – are being reified, modernized and monetized.

To explain these contradictions we can return to Mies' concept of 'housewifization', in which housewives are the emblematic subject of exploitation and precarity in the modern world. The concept of 'housewifization' has recently been revisited by Bhattacharyya (2018) and Hearn (2017) to discuss the existence of precarity through the extraction of forms of 'invisible labour' – whether doing more work under the guise of leisure or consumption, or the extra labour of constructing 'a reputation not entirely one's own in the service of capitalist accumulation', or a 'monetization of being' (Hearn, 2017, pp. 21, 12; see also Hearn, 2008). Relatedly, Kylie Jarrett identifies a contradiction at the centre of digital media, namely that while it offers an opportunity to express identity, build communities and engage politically, at the same time, users provide free content for sites in common with other unpaid and exploited workers (Jarrett, 2016). As an unpaid domestic worker, the 'digital housewife' is exploited by a lucrative digital industry which makes significant gains from the free content and user data which the digital housewife generates (Jarrett, 2016). Cleanfluencers are thus encouraged, as the title of Brooke Erin Duffy's book puts it, to *Do What You Love (without getting paid)* (Duffy, 2019).

Mrs Hinch both exemplifies this process and offers a dramatic spin on it, which we term 'spectacular housewifization'. It is a process which works in several ways. First, she is a 'success story' in economic terms (her income generates tabloid headlines in the UK) and in effect gets 'wages for housework'. Yet the spectacular image of Hinch re-emphasizes and *re-genders* the task of unpaid domestic labour as female. Second, Mrs Hinch is positioned as an Instagram 'success story', held up as a 'parable of progress' whilst numerous striving and failed entrepreneurs do not get adequate economic rewards and are not socially visible (Littler, 2018). Being a social media influencer is notoriously precarious and riven with inequalities, even though influencers have started to try to unionize to secure better conditions and deals (Tait, 2020). Sophie Hinchliffe's anxieties that her dramatic economic success will be temporary – that it could and probably

will all vanish tomorrow, that it is peripatetic and unstable – are continually voiced throughout her memoirs. They register both her classed position, and the context of precarious labour in an asset economy. At the same time, her whiteness has secured her more media advantage in this ‘economy of visibility’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018), for black influencers do not receive as much income as white (Sobande, 2020). Third, as we have shown, Sophie Hinchliffe conducts ‘identity labour’ to produce Mrs Hinch as a brand, which works to produce assets, social connections and opportunities, but also new forms of alienation. In her most recent book Mrs Hinch also writes of the forms of alienation and stress of being online: in short, how digital labour and all the trolling that comes with it has meant she has ‘gone on medication for depression and anxiety for the first time’ in her life (2020b, p. 176).

If these anxieties are bound up with gendered and classed forms of digital vulnerability and exploitation, they are also part of wider social rationalities, for which, as we explore in the next section, ‘Hinching’ is regularly presented as a kind of therapy: as a means to scour away different kinds of crisis.

Scouring away neoliberalism: Cleaning as therapy

In this section we discuss how cleanfluencing reframes domestic labour as a form of therapy. Hinching is not just cleaning and organizing: it also offers aesthetic pleasure and the sharing of a curated lifestyle. In these terms the Instagram feed also draws on familiar tropes from women’s interior décor magazines and weekend newspaper features. It focuses on details of home décor and we find out where Mrs Hinch bought her ‘bargs’. We learn about her son’s play habits, and we see her berate her dog, Henry, as he digs up the wrong place in the garden. We are presented with images of her ‘everyday’ domestic lifestyle and parenting (‘sharenting’). But alongside, and through, the sharing and selling of domestic lifestyle is the primary focus on cleaning and organizing, or ‘Hinching’. And crucially a key feature of Hinching is that it is presented as being *therapeutic*: it offers comfort, calm and order.

The therapeutic promise is also key to the work of many other social media ‘cleanfluencers’ and declutterers, where cleaning and organizing tips are not simply a quicker route to completing mundane drudgery, but a means of achieving a better emotional and affective state. For instance Marie Kondo’s wildly popular ‘KonMari’ minimalist decluttering method – in which a person only keeps their possessions if the object is useful or sparks joy – promises greater contentment; US-based CleanMama’s online routines of doing laundry on a Monday and carpets on a Tuesday promise to bring not only better organization but ‘less stress’ and ‘to end the overwhelm’.⁷ They can all be situated as part of a wider turn to and social popularization of self-help and therapy culture (Illouz, 2008).

The therapeutic properties of Hinching are regularly referred to by Mrs Hinch and her followers, as evidenced in the title of her book, *Hinch Yourself Happy: All the Best Cleaning Tips to Shine Your Sink and Soothe Your Soul* (2019).⁸ The therapeutic promise of Hinching is simultaneously oriented towards creating cosy glamour and affordable domestic luxury, and soothing order against anxiety and a threatening world. For instance, in early 2021 (5 January), one story focused on tidying up after Christmas. ‘There’s

something so therapeutic about folding! It's the simplest things', states the text, as her hands carefully fold 'the last of the washed Christmas bedding' and she offers the tip that we can put all the bedding in the pillowcase. The texture of the 'therapeutic effect' is presented lightly (with a wink emoji) and connected to polished interior décor and her body: we constantly see her bejewelled and manicured hands, and tattooed wrists, folding and wiping.

The comfort, calm and order are in part created through the key feature of *routine*. Mrs Hinch's Instagram stories record multiple, repeated daily occurrences often featuring the same background song. For example, each morning her toddler son, Ronnie, is filmed in slow motion running towards the camera and filling the dog bowl; during December 2020, there was a daily feature story of Ronnie opening his advent calendar and her dog eating a treat from his. There are weekly activities like 'Freshn' Up Friday' where Mrs Hinch compiles a list of different 'non-essential' additional jobs to complete. Routine and repetition are present in other ways too. For example, in the regular shots of Mrs Hinch cleaning surfaces, we rarely see her face or body: instead we see the repeated movements of her free arm – a sponge soaked in washing-up liquid and water making slow, repeated circular motions across her electric hob, a window 'squeegee' slowly moving down a window pane leaving behind sparkling, clear glass.

In contrast to the studies we described above that positioned domestic labour as torturous in its repetition, Mrs Hinch re-presents routine as something positive, even celebratory; as a calm, soothing and almost meditative space. Whilst it fits with longer-standing narratives of housework creating order amongst domestic chaos, it also has a different function: it is offered as a means of smoothing away the anxieties and troubles of the contemporary world and reaching for a happier and calmer sense of self. Repetition and routine offer predictability, sanctuary and safety in a world increasingly defined as uncertain and unsafe.

The opening chapter of her memoir, *This is Me*, begins with an anecdote about how, after signing some cleaning products in Poundland, a woman taps her on the shoulder:

She was a GP and she told me that she had a number of patients who'd been able to come off their medication because of watching me on Instagram. She called it the 'Hinch Effect'.

'You are the reason' she added, 'that they are excited about cleaning their homes. They have something positive to focus on and they've made friends with other Hinchers on social media so they don't feel so alone any more.' (Hinch, 2020b, p. 7)

If this anecdote is indicative of the high number of people on antidepressants in the UK, which has doubled over the past decade, to 17% of the population (Davies, 2016; Segal, 2017), it also shows how Hinch-ing is offered as a solution. This collectivity can be related to the earlier examples we mentioned – from shared tips to Tupperware parties – of women finding communities of support for their domestic labour and lives. The role of Hinch-ing-as-therapy is highlighted at the outset of the memoir, and the theme is regularly returned to throughout, in terms of both its prescription as socio-cultural cure and as the origin story of why 'Mrs Hinch' emerged. *This is Me* presents her life as a battle with social anxiety, weight gain and bullying. She finds solace in being at home; her

'wholesome' domestic life and her family become a refuge. Later, working away from Essex in London is frightening; she values the comfort of home and battles different kinds of social anxiety and 'never feel[ing] worthy enough' (2020b, p. 60). Although they are not put in sociological terms, the powerfully gendered pressures to look a certain way (her struggles with weight) and classed anxieties about not having enough cultural capital (to work in London/to be sophisticated enough) are palpable.

It is when she starts organizing and disinfecting her own home with the heavily-scented Zoflora that her mother gives her that 'I discovered just how much cleaning calmed me down' (2020b, p. 77). *This is Me* is a narrative riven by anxiety in which the ritualized cleaning of the feminized family domestic realm is a soothing practice that largely functions to keep the often frightening and regularly scary wider world at bay. This theme is echoed and made explicit in the title of the new book by her friend, reality TV star Stacey Solomon, *Tap to Tidy: Organising, Crafting and Creating Happiness in a Messy World* (2021).

The messy world, the chaotic outside, is then full of gendered, classed and geographical crises. Just as the 'messy world' and the generalized anxiety need to be taken seriously, so too do these domestic practices need to be related to their social context outside as well as inside the home. The multiple crises which, as Walby puts it, have 'cascaded' through the social body since the financial crash have created everyday contexts which are increasingly precarious, unstable and uncertain for the majority of people (Walby, 2015). Deprivation and austerity have disproportionately affected women and particularly those who are 'mothering through precarity' (Bramall, 2013; Jensen, 2018; Wilson & Chivers Yochim, 2017). We might also note that the 'outside world' beyond the domestic realm is often literally 'messy' in that the spending on public spaces has been drastically cut (Care Collective, 2020; Puwar, 2017). These combined contexts are those in which we can situate Mrs Hinch's attempts to scrub away anxiety as akin to 'resilience' (McRobbie, 2020). Cleaning is conveyed as a means of coping with different kinds of difficulty and trauma in a routinely threatening world.

The emphasis on cleaning as a means of self-protection to 'soothe your soul' is primarily an individualized message, and connects to what Diane Negra describes as a cultural tendency towards 'domestic retreatism', where partially infantilized women are encouraged to stay in their place (Negra, 2009; see also Orgad, 2019). This is of course ironic as Sophie Hinchliffe becomes more publicly powerful, yet women being powerful in the public sphere whilst insisting their rightful role is primarily in the private sphere is also a longstanding trope of conservative femininity (Littler, 2013). Whilst digital communication is valuable in terms of connection and scale, and clearly important when there is no alternative during a pandemic, the emphasis on bounded household practice and the extent to which it is fetishized actively reinforce gendered forms of social restriction and isolation.

For although there is often some recognition of the significant labour and work expended on housework, the reality, mess and stress of this labour – what is sometimes known as 'dirty work' – is omitted from the final image of the spotless, tidy house (Anderson, 2000). This is most pronounced in how, repeatedly on Instagram Stories, Mrs Hinch clicks her fingers and the image changes to show a messy-to-clean space or a new form of organization. It presents us with a kind of magical housework femininity rather than showing us the labour of that 'dirty work' or rejecting housework in favour of more

hedonistic activities (Littler, 2020). The fetishized display of the final products of domestic labour was first popularized in the 1960s (Casey, 2019) but as Sara de Benedictis and Shani Orgad write, the aesthetic labour of the contemporary SAHM or ‘stay at home housewife’ is alive today, demanding intense work of its subjects even whilst this labour is masked (de Benedictis & Orgad, 2017; Orgad, 2019). Digital images have helped entrench the normative notion of the ‘effortless housewife’, who doesn’t toil too much, or complain unless via humorous gesture. She takes personal responsibility for her feelings around housework. She presents an image of her housework to the outside world as one of ease, joy and therapeutic satisfaction.

As Laurie Ouellette argues of the minimalist declutterer Marie Kondo, ‘untidiness signified by a chaotic surplus of household goods is not a personal choice, but a manifestation of late capitalism, including women’s unrelenting double shift’ (Ouellette, 2019, p. 548). Whilst the KonMari method pledges to ‘spark joy’, Ouellette writes, it cannot obscure this wider mess. This is not to say that focus on the domestic realm and self-fashioning is inevitably or necessarily regressive. For instance, Adam Ramsay (2020) makes a case for reality TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* as a site helping reconfigure straight masculinity away from many of its more toxic aspects. Arguing that it is a progressive counter to right-wing patriarchy like Jordan Peterson, Ramsay suggests such lifestyle makeover programmes might extend their social remit, by, for example, showing local unions negotiating better workplace conditions, or establishing a neighbourhood tenants collective, as another solution to individual problems.⁹

In this vein it is useful to do a thought-exercise to consider how everyday cleanfluencer feeds might potentially be more socially progressive, galvanizing the support of online communities of followers. Could there be social media feeds in which *men* would do and share the housework? In which cleanfluencers would not promote environmentally unhealthy products by highly problematic multinational corporations? In which they could promote diverse influencers’ rights as workers, and even wider related issues, such as the demand for all parents and carers to be furloughed part-time during Covid?

Conclusions

Existing research tells us that housework, cleaning and domestic practices remain heavily gendered, a dynamic that has been exacerbated under the Covid-19 pandemic (Women’s Budget Group, 2021). Housework is often connected to the reproduction of normative feminine values around facilitating the health and wellbeing of the family. Historically, cleaning has been perceived as apolitical, meaningless, mundane, unpaid and undervalued labour originally facilitating men’s paid work and later facilitating new domestic consumer cultures. Whilst it is still the case today that domestic life remains marginalized in sociological literature, by contrast, as Mrs Hinch and the wider army of ‘cleanfluencers’ exemplify, women are hyper-visible within mainstream popular culture, busy producing their own content and self-representations.

In this article we have argued that in neoliberal culture, a ‘therapeutic promise’ of cleaning is being fashioned, one which appears to offer solutions to multiple forms of instability. We pursue this argument through three interrelated lines of analysis. First, contemporary housework is being reframed and refashioned: presented as a route to a fun and glamorous everyday, as a means of entrepreneurial fulfilment, and as satisfying and

soothing. What we might call the new ‘positive housework movement’ is in many ways a form of hyper-conformity which fits in and reinvigorates the longer-term trends existing within patriarchal capitalism, which offers a conservative form of femininity, reinscribes highly traditionally gendered roles and endows value on them. In the case of Mrs Hinch, like many other cleanfluencers, housework roles are re-packaged as life-changing and self-transformative. It is a new ‘hyper-domestic’ (Casey, 2019) stylization of housework; what we call, following Mies, ‘spectacular housewifization’. The classed normality of Sophie Hinchliffe and her success provides a familiar parable of progress even whilst it continues to insist, in time-honoured celebrity style, on its normality, its ordinariness, its distance from seriously pre-planned entrepreneurial labour.

Second, the unpaid domestic labour Mrs Hinch conducts has been monetized and spectacularized through digital identity labour: the presentation and curation of her persona online for profit. It is a form of work which has given her wealth and social reach, offering her opportunities. Yet it both has a simultaneously enabling and disabling practice in relation to class, and is also unstable, precarious and often short-lived. As Mrs Hinch shows, it can engender deep and classed anxieties around the ‘packaging’ of identity and its vulnerability to online attack.

Third, Mrs Hinch, like other cleanfluencers, refashions housework as therapy. Narratives of self-help are crucial to her popular appeal. Cleaning has long been associated with order and routine and is frequently entwined with emotions of anxiety, unhappiness, dissatisfaction and a restrictive sense of self. Women have long been adept at utilizing housework in order to ‘get by’ within the confines of constraining structural forces. But this refashioning of cleaning as a therapeutic project is part of a distinctly contemporary social and cultural conjuncture. Cleanfluencing, in line with wider neoliberal narratives of self-help via personal aspiration, betterment and familial and personal wellbeing and happiness, offers a tactic for soothing the soul. Mrs Hinch conveys cleaning as a means of coping with different kinds of difficulty and trauma in an often-threatening world. ‘Hinching’ is an attempt to invite women to try to ‘clean away’ some of the instabilities and anxious effects of neoliberal culture, even whilst so many of its solutions are temporary, and continue to exacerbate the problems.

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Notes

1. See for instance ‘I never said I was perfect’, *You Magazine* 27 September 2020. www.you.co.uk/mrs-hinch-interview-2020/ ; and *This Morning*: www.itv.com/thismorning/articles/

- it-was-time-to-speak-up-mrs-hinch-opens-up-about-trolls-in-new-personal-book (accessed 1 September 2021).
2. Tesco and Asda are two of the biggest supermarket chains in the UK. They are notably significantly cheaper than the more 'up-market' supermarket chains Sainsbury's and Waitrose.
 3. Notoriously, during and after the Second World War, de Beauvoir dealt with this complexity by living in a hotel, the Hotel La Louisiane.
 4. Solutions having included a shorter working week; wages for housework; gender equity in housework; the socialization of housework; the abolition of the family.
 5. Housed at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and viewable here: www.moca.org/collection/work/untitled-its-a-small-world-but-not-if-you-have-to-clean-it (accessed 16 February 2020).
 6. 9 February 2021. <https://twitter.com/Telegraph/status/1359212615164186624>
 7. See www.cleanmama.com (accessed 1 April 2021).
 8. Followers of Mrs Hinch often remark on the particular appeal offered by the routine and predictability of her account, which they describe as reassuring and soothing, for example 'I love your daily updates. It's like watching a soap opera' and 'I am self-isolating and your account gives me a little daily pick me up'.
 9. Similarly, Mark Fisher offered alternative imagining of *Supernanny* that tackled raising children as a social issue – a 'Marxist Supernanny' – in *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher, 2009).

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