

# 360 Degrees of Feminine Competence: Surface Aesthetics, Expertise, and Authority Among Drip Cake Baker-Influencers

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## Abstract

This article explores the gendered expertise of neoliberal female influencers associated with a novel baking form, the “drip cake.” It engages in a close historically and theoretically informed analysis of a selection of popular online bakers’ content, majoring on their skill-sharing tutorials. Online images of drip cakes are distinctive and spectacular, and their creation is demanding. Yet they have become a mainstream standard of fashionable baking. First, the research shows how exclusive knowledge drawn from patisserie and modernist design has been co-opted by this mix of amateur and professional bakers and transformed and capitalised on through their non-boundaried community of practice into something they announce as definitively theirs. Second, digital cake and baking have been considered previously as part of a post-feminist retreat, reframing and aestheticizing traditional white, cis-gendered, female domesticity. However, in the case of the drip cake, a remarkable lack of reference to family or domestic life in the sample demands further analysis. Drip cake images exemplify aspects of post-feminist digital “food porn,” but again elements of this are extended and defied by this phenomenon. Alternatively, cake images have been interpreted as expressions of mastery and competence. We build on these perspectives to explore the drip cake as a form of fashionable capital that stands for an ideal skin, body, and subjectivity in a striking performance of multiple aspects of cool, post-feminist perfection. We focus especially on the laboured and contradictory surface of the drip cake, finding little pleasure in eating or feeding, but instead, a celebration of rationality, cleanliness, and control; distinction produced through the creation of something formally perfect and fashionably current from the most unruly of substances.

## Keywords

baking; modernism; neoliberalism; patisserie; post-feminism; surface

## 1. Introduction

Jaunty ukulele music sets the mood for happy crafting as we tilt down a sumptuous celebration cake. In medium shot, a conventionally attractive white woman, Courtney, from *Cake by Courtney*, explains she is finally going to demonstrate “how to create a drip on your cake.” She looks heavenward in ecstatic anticipatory joy: “Let me show you how it’s done, because it is *really easy*” (Rich, 2017).

Next, a close-up of a blank, iced cake and Courtney’s manicured hands gesture repeatedly to the top and sides of a cream-coloured cylinder. Talking and smiling, she shows how best to angle and squeeze the drip bottle right at the circumference to ensure precise lines of ganache run down the cake’s frozen surface, while her other hand deftly rotates the turntable supporting it. Careful, studied movement gives way to a quicker, seemingly effortless (but equally perfect) distribution of the dripped chocolate, and the video speeds up. Courtney smooths chocolate over the uncannily flat top surface before adding tall whirls of frosting and blocks of churros, finally squirting further chocolate over this profusion. The music concludes contentedly, and we return to the completed cake. Hours of expert labour have been condensed into little over two minutes of very satisfying video. Thousands of similar drip cake tutorials are available online.

In this article, we bring together perspectives from food-cultural studies and critical fashion studies to examine the relationship between new forms of expertise (embodied and online) and largely white, largely middle-class forms of femininity. As Sobande and others have argued, aestheticized online baking is a raced, classed, and gendered activity (Sobande, 2024). We contend that the drip cake and its digital manifestations demonstrate a particularly concentrated range of desirable yet elusive feminine qualities (skill/effortlessness; fashionability/individual expression; cleanliness and efficiency/hedonism). Where studies of baking media typically foreground domesticity, motherhood, and home-making, the drip cake mobilises other ideals, overlapping with various forms of “coolness,” such as fashionability, techno-rationality, and passionate work (Brown, 2021). At the same time, these ideals resonate strongly with wider debates about women’s online performances of “perfect” subjectivity under conditions of post-feminist neoliberalism and “having it all” (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gill, 2021; Lewis, 2011; McRobbie, 2015; Wilkes, 2015).

The drip cake phenomenon brings together and mediates a complex set of materials, practices, and forms of knowledge that demand a multi-disciplinary approach to interpret effectively. An understanding of baking materials and processes points to the labour involved, and the criticality of surface, while historical precedent in *pâtisserie* (French, masculine) expertise and modern design more broadly informs our understanding of the new aesthetic standards innovated by these women and the ways in which they “own” them. The body is also critical—these cakes may be digital objects, but they are made through embodied skill, shown alongside their makers, and may also be seen as a surrogate body, worked upon as a form of cultural capital that may yield profits in distinction.

The drip cake (see Figure 1) came to our attention during the initial stages of an investigation about aesthetics in professional *pâtisserie*, a field largely neglected across food-cultural, design-historical, and fashion studies. It is significant that when we went looking for classical *pâtisserie*, Google offered us drip cakes and their youthful, white, female bakers. Geometrically perfect, yes, but a form of baking and display that did not simply originate in professional *pâtisserie*. The drip cake is always sharply cylindrical, covered with a “playful” glaze, and frequently surmounted by an explosion of additional confectionery. Though the name is unfamiliar outside



**Figure 1.** Drip cakes by a follower of Cupcake Jemma (R. Winfield, personal communication, 2024).

baking communities, in the first episode of the popular amateur TV baking competition *Great British Bake-Off* in 2023 (UK, Channel 4), every one of the diverse cohort chose to make one—the drip cake is a new “classic.”

The drip cake aesthetic has originated in online performances of highly skilled labour and expertise from younger female *baker-influencers*—a mixture of largely self-taught “digital foodscape originalists” (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020, p. 187) and professional women bakers who have migrated to digital platforms. These two groups do not exist in a hierarchical relationship to one another, but have co-created this aesthetic, drawing on a number of craft, design, and culinary traditions. We question the nature of the expertise being adopted, transformed, and shared, and the feminine subjectivities bound up in these digital cake trends.

The drip cake exemplifies the impact of digital culture on food. Taylor and Keating (2018) describe a “normalisation of exaggerated styling” (p. 307) and a tendency towards “visualising unattainable ideals” (p. 310). Feldman (2021) observes the “desocialisation” of digital food images, which focus on food as object, rather than the social interactions around it, including its eating. Feldman also describes an “Instagram gaze.” Like the stacked burger, the drip cake’s appearance has developed through small-screen viewing via digital platforms—before Instagram, print media food stylists and home bakers were happy with significantly less height, but at least three layers of cake, frosting, and topping now fill the screen. Feminist critique has complicated what food porn might be, or mean, in the post-feminist cultural landscape (Dejmanee, 2016; Negra, 2009). Dejmanee (2016) emphasises the “pornographic” characteristics of digital food: “vivid imagery,” “close-ups,” and the “invitation to gaze” and “vicariously consume” (p. 439). Our analysis of drip cake imagery reveals further dimensions to its workings.

Critically, the consumption of drip cakes is not simply vicarious, indeed it is not necessarily implied at all. Despite the suggestion of a social feast essential to the scale and cost of a celebration cake, in our study visual and textual references to sharing or eating them were strikingly absent. It may not be overstatement to suggest that their purpose is presented as largely aesthetic.

Our conviction that studying a cake is a worthy way to explore contemporary forms of feminine expertise and embodiment follows W. J. T. Mitchell’s contention that cultural artefacts reveal “new forms of value...in the collective, political unconscious” (Mitchell, 2005, as cited in Moxey, 2008, p. 142). Our work also engages the recent “turn to surface” in cultural and design studies, which questions assumptions about the ontologies of

surface and emphasises the profound cultural relations tied up in producing and maintaining surface effects (Coleman & Oakley-Brown, 2017, p. 6). In terms of method, we began by searching for images using cake and drip cake-related hashtags. This led us to the online tutorials which underpin our understanding of women's investment in this phenomenon. From these, we identified several popular baker-influencers, analysing their biographical narratives and selected posts. Our digital sample was contextualised through drip cake imagery in conventional food media, particularly cookbooks and food shows. One of us also bakes and engages with these materials, processes, and aesthetics, which necessarily informs our analysis. Our interpretation is supported by studies of digital food and food porn (Dejmanee, 2016; Feldman, 2021; Lupton, 2020; Taylor & Keating, 2018) and critical studies of post-femininity (Casey & Littler, 2022; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gill, 2021; Holmes & Negra, 2011; Nathanson, 2015). Unlike other analyses of cake imagery, we situate the aesthetics and expertise in trans-national historical traditions of baking and, given the formal similarity with modernist material culture, architecture and design. In particular, we engage with Cheng's critique of the modern surface as "second skin" in architecture (2011), and Kelley's insights into the cultural politics of perfected, laboured surfaces (2013). We extend our analysis of skin, surface, and status through broader cultural theorisations of the body.

In what follows, we introduce our baker-influencers in terms of their backgrounds, status, and the varied femininities they perform, before briefly situating the development of the drip cake as a fashion trend. We then analyse the drip cake itself in more detail: examining how it is made, the significance of its surfaces, and its existence as a digital cultural artefact. The next section questions the relationship between these practices and the historical traditions (both culinary and in the broader design field) available to our baker-influencers; to what extent is this a form of democratised patisserie, and how might this relate to their co-option of modernist design aesthetics? In the succeeding section we go further, examining the qualities and connotations of the iced surface, the drip, and the topping in more detail.

Finally, we argue for the cake as a surrogate skin and body that is classed, gendered, raced, and historically-located. We also argue for the drip cake as a counter-intuitive example of the drive towards cleanliness and control within neoliberal times. We further interpret it in terms of status. Deploying Goffman's notion of "composure," we show how the skills demanded by the drip cake and the ways in which it is presented by our baker-influencers afford them a form of prestige analogous to certain conceptions of "cool" (Brown, 2021).

## 2. The Cake and the Bakers

The baker-influencers selected for focus are all from the Anglosphere: self-taught American baker Courtney Rich (Cake by Courtney), Australian ex-teacher Katherine Sabbath, and two Britons, art-school-trained amateur-turned-professional-baker Jemma Wilson (aka Cupcake Jemma, founder of Crumbs and Doilies in London) and trained (but not practising) chef-turned-blogger Jane Dunn (Jane's Patisserie). All have authored monographs, Katherine Sabbath's being available as a premium pop-up book. Their digital ecology is variegated, with Instagram focusing on finished bakes, YouTube on tutorials, blogging on recipes, and TikTok on micro tips, directions to YouTube videos, and seasonal bakes.

During our research, Katherine Sabbath, Cupcake Jemma, and Cake by Courtney each had around 500k Instagram followers, with Jane's Patisserie more popular with over 900k followers. On YouTube, Cupcake Jemma was most popular with 2.45 million subscribers compared to Jane's Patisserie's 62k, and Cake by

Courtney's 35.8k. Katherine Sabbath has a much smaller presence on YouTube, but a growing presence on TikTok.

Each baker-influencer represents a slightly different (largely white) femininity entangled with the drip cake aesthetic. All emphasise their role as demonstrators and teachers. When seen, these women are presented variously as fun entrepreneurs (Katherine and Jane), style mavens (Katherine, and to some extent Jemma), artisans (Jemma), and competent ordinary domestic bakers (Courtney). Courtney, and others like her, are blonde, cleanly presented in a white domestic kitchen confirming the drip cake as an achievable aspiration for an "ordinary" baker.

Jane's image emphasises her entrepreneurial success, excitedly clutching her latest book or product range, or celebrating a business anniversary with balloons and champagne. She radiates youthful relatability and accessibility, whereas Jemma connotes the hipster artisan, with a functional apron, short black fringe, tattooed arms, and steel bench. The natural lighting of her focused professionalism suggests authenticity. Her noticeably longer instruction videos are serious.

Katherine Sabbath's website borrows the postmodern building-block aesthetic of Memphis design, while her dazzling, graphic outfits and sharp, black fringe mark her as a fashionable creative leader; fans have tattoos of her iconic designs. Unlike our other baker-influencers, Australian Sabbath is of mixed heritage, her mother being Vietnamese and her father German. She describes this multicultural background as the source of her "curious appetite" (Sabbath, 2018). Both she and Cupcake Jemma have been described as "badass"; a problematic term, originally describing powerful black female coolness that "re-signifies qualities typically associated with masculinity" (Johnson, 2014). For women more broadly, the term has been used to suggest success through uncompromising tactics—in this case, aesthetics. Entrepreneurial success which departs from traditional forms of femininity associated with baking has conferred "coolness" on both Katherine Sabbath and Cupcake Jemma, as well as, potentially, on baking more generally.

### **2.1. Drip Cake as Fashion Trend**

Sabbath is credited with originating the drip cake around 2015, indeed it kickstarted her career. Until 2023, her homepage showed her holding this now iconic cake design—the resolutely machinic cake-plinth, with an upturned ice-cream cone apparently melting down its sides. Having circulated online, it peaked around 2017, achieving cross-modal dominance and having been adapted from the original ice cream design to express varied femininities: vaguely subcultural, sophisticated, populist. In 2020, Martha Stewart's *Baking Perfection* cover image was a monolithic drip cake and a year later Reddit commentators agreed that although they were "over it", the trend persisted (Glitterysparkleshine, 2021). By then, the drip cake was appearing in a much wider range of food influencers' content, breaking out from its largely white, sweet-focused community of early adopters.

By 2024, "drip cake" had fallen from online cake trend lists. But it has endured for several reasons. First, given the difficulty of achieving its core aesthetics, it has become a marker of influencers' expertise, and a standard for many aspiring home bakers. Influencers must post frequently, working with already popular hashtags to ensure they are found and followed. Novel, visually arresting content retains engagement, necessitating a proliferation of drip cake reinterpretations: naked, marble, upside-down, splat, biophilic, "cartoon." This follows

the same trajectory as many fast fashion trends, whose lives must be extended as economically as possible. On Sabbath's website, a subordinate drip cake image still claims her as originator, but she is now shown piping a "maximalist" "Lambeth cake," confirming her timely aesthetic departure.

Domestic baking has been experimental, status-building, and aspirational since the 1960s (Casey, 2019, p. 586). The drip cake goes beyond this, becoming a fashionable motif (or even accessory), and our baker-influencers' content a form of fashion leadership and advice. Sabbath is branded as cake-trend innovator, while the others are intermediaries who select and adapt ideas for their followers. This is also apparent in their address to followers—a 2019 drip cake blog post from our contextual research by Milk and Honey concluded thus: "And he said unto them: 'As for you, go forth and make beautiful, on-trend cakes'" (Abaffy, 2019). Like other influencers operating in the non-boundaried space of the fashion blogosphere (Suh, 2020), they claim the authority of the taste maven within the logics of the platform.

## 2.2. *The Cake: Thing, Image, and Surface*

Despite the drip cake's currency as a fashionable image, it is, as we have noted, a particularly labour- and skill-intensive, stubbornly and capriciously material thing formed by technical, visceral engagement with volatile substances, and an assembly of surfaces. Competence in baking exemplifies a shift from a post-feminist "empowerment of consumption" to "empowerment through production" (Dejmanee, 2016, p. 443). To grasp just how much is at stake, some detail is beneficial. Drip cake ingredients are accessible enough, but a successful cake demands exact vertical height, complete flatness, and symmetry through 360 degrees. Achieving these effects involves repetitive, time-consuming work, costly ingredients, and specialist tools. First, high volumes of material are required to get height—which is expensive and difficult to manage in a domestic kitchen. Second, ensuring each layer is a perfect circle of uniform depth and width is achieved by freezing and trimming the sponges, including a cake board on the very top. Third, to further ensure a perfected clean surface and edges, a "dirty" icing coat is applied, smoothed using special tools, and refrozen (crumbs, Courtney dictates, must be "locked in"), before the outer layer is crafted (the icing may itself also require refrigeration or re-beating). Finally, the drip can be applied, which also critically demands the correct temperature and consistency. Our baker-influencers both encourage and discourage domestic bakers by demonstrating the precise method "every step" (of the many steps) "of the way." The consequences of home bakers failing to prepare the right surface accompanied the trend; on Reddit, for example, where wonky, lumpy, inconsistent drip cakes were judged "hilariously bad."

Adamson and Kelley's *Surface Tensions* (2013) addresses the social relations of class, gender, and race at play in the creation and maintenance of such surface effects, themselves entangled with light, space, bodies, and media. Kelley notes the inevitable degradation of wood, textile, and paper surfaces, and the "strenuous efforts" made to "stave off such changes" (Adamson & Kelley, 2013, p. 13). The materials chosen to make a cake are particularly challenging viewed through this lens: Soft sponge rises unevenly and unpredictably, and buttercream frosting, which never sets, is vulnerable to the slightest impression. The ontologies of surface in Western thought are fraught with contradictions and ambivalences, and the drip cake surface dramatizes such polarised and precarious contrasts: Something vulnerable and ephemeral, feminine and festive is crafted to look rock solid, impermeable. As a digital photograph, degradation is permanently postponed for these cakes, a memento mori credentialing baker-influencers along with thousands of amateur bakers proud of their improbable achievements.

### 3. Authority and Expertise

In this section, we situate baker-influencers and their digital expertise within *pâtisserie*, a sub-field of the broader culinary field. For Bourdieu (1993), all cultural fields are arenas within which individuals, groups, and institutions compete for the same stakes. A creative field is a “*field of forces*” but also “a *field of struggles* [which] transforms or conserves this field of forces” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30, emphasis in the original). Here we explore drip-cake baker-influencers’ relationship to long- and more recently-established forms of artisanal authority. We conclude that they exert a parallel authority and status within the field, albeit one subject to accelerating requirements to stay on-trend.

Authority in sweet foodstuffs is centred on France, where *pâtisserie* was established within early modern gastronomy. Access to colonial resources and markets accelerated this dominance, guaranteeing supplies of sugar, cocoa, and vanilla. The French Revolution dispersed this aristocratic culinary knowledge around Europe before reassembling, codifying, and partially democratising it in post-revolutionary France (Kronl, 2016; Parkhurst Ferguson, 2004). The most prominent exponent of this reconfigured foodscape, the recognised father of spectacular *pâtisserie*, was Marie-Antoine Carême, who became known for the creation and recording of elaborate architectural centrepieces. Carême intellectualised these decorative confections and the practice of *pâtisserie* (and *cuisine*), promoting them as art. Tebben (2015, p. 18) writes that in the 19th century, *pâtisserie* became “emancipated and free, with equal rights and equally legitimate claims” to the high status of standard French cooking. This expertise and innovativeness have continued to shape the field nationally and globally.

The streamlined, geometric, and precise aesthetic associated with modern *pâtisserie* originated in the innovations of Gaston Lenôtre in France after the Second World War. Lenôtre introduced technical and formal advances in industrial *pâtisserie* production and was a leading educator and promoter of globalising French baking standards. One apprentice, Sébastien Canonne, set up the first French Pastry School in the USA in 1995, while another, Pierre Hermé, pushed his craft towards the artistic terrain established by Carême. Dubbed the “Picasso of pastry” by *Vogue*, his themed seasonal collections have made him the “Karl Lagerfeld of macarons” (Greenspan, 2004, p. 94). Hermé has further extended the reach of French *pâtisserie*, with boutiques in Tokyo and the Middle East.

French authority in *pâtisserie* continues to be credentialed through competition and reward. These are visible in popular representations, for example, *Kings of Pastry* (2010, dir. Chris Hegedus & D. A. Pennebaker), which documents the Meilleur Ouvrier de France, a quadrennial competition. In it, fellow Lenôtre apprentice Jacquy Pfeiffer is mentored by Canonne. Pfeiffer and Canonne (representing the USA) were runners-up in the 1997 Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie, a biennial event held in Lyon and dominated by French chefs (though with increasing Asian success). This mythology has been further popularised via a series of predominantly USA TV cookery shows featuring a French pastry chef as judge, upholding artisanal authority. Examples include Florian Bellenger (*Cupcake Wars*, Food Network, 2009–2018) and Jacques Torres (*Next Great Baker*, TLC, 2014; *Nailed It!*, Netflix, 2018–present). Meanwhile, French patissiers, including Hermé, have moved into online instruction with ventures like *pastryclass.com*. As in classical tradition, all these figures are professional male chefs. While there have been elite women, most prominently Cherish Finden, the Singapore-born leader of a team of pastry chefs that won the IKA Culinary Olympics in 2000, and Nina Métayer, the first female winner of the 2016 World Pastry Chef award, *pâtisserie* largely corresponds to,

and reproduces, the widely-discussed division between a feminine domestic culinary sphere and a masculine public culinary sphere (Black, 2021; Hollows, 2022, pp. 28–29).

The field, then, was shaped by French masculine culinary-cultural hegemony. Yet even at its 19th-century zenith, other traditions and sources of authority influenced relevant patisserie aesthetics. Queen Victoria's huge 1840 wedding cake was a single tier of rich fruitcake, with a surface (afterwards called "royal icing") made from a thick layer of almond paste "encrusted with white sugar icing so stiff that brides were equipped with a special saw" (Allen, 2003, p. 459). These royal cakes grew more architecturally elaborate and multi-tiered, making the late-Victorian wedding cake "a largely commercial product" (Allen, 2003, p. 481). Two features of the drip cake, therefore—spectacular height and a hard-to-achieve machinic surface—were, to some extent, established in Victorian Britain.

The drip cake does not use royal icing, despite similarities in the surface ideal, indeed buttercream is at odds with the authority of "classical" techniques. French patisserie had experimented with buttercream surfaces, but as Krondl notes, the "buttercream-filled layer cake never really took off in France" (2016, p. 230). More significant was the USA where small buttercream cakes were popular by the early 19th century, and ubiquitous in ordinary mid-century American bakeries, cylindrical and pastel-coloured.

At the turn of the millennium, retro cupcakes became heavily mediated objects of desire, most famously in the depiction of New York's Magnolia Bakery in *Sex and the City* (HBO, 2000), prompting an international craze and numerous new businesses. Here, too, is a source of offline authority and inspiration for bakers, where stylised cakes encountered fashionable female entrepreneurialism (Nathanson, 2015, p. 250).

In this way, traditionally domestic forms of baking have been elevated into professional craft with correspondingly higher (in some cases luxury) status. Concurrently, buttercream was transformed from a (usually piped) decorative topping or filling associated with homeliness to a smooth, encasing surface. The film *Marie Antoinette* (2006, dir. Sofia Coppola) depicted a decadent scene of pastel-coloured buttercream cakes, which influenced fashion editorial photography, crystallising a post-feminist "radical frivolity" (Willson, 2015, p. 62); a shameless indulgence in feminine hedonism. This coincided with the appearance of London-based, Cordon-Bleu-trained Peggy Porschen's tall, minimalist, cylindrical pastel buttercream celebration cakes, whose success has been attributed to their "Insta" qualities. Significantly, in 2018, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's multi-tiered wedding cake (made by American baker Clare Ptak, owner of London's Violet café), was the first royal cake to use buttercream. Her cookbook, *Love Is a Pink Cake* notes, laconically, that the Lemon and Elderflower Wedding Cake is "not for the beginner" (Coke, 2023).

Charting the gourmet foodscape, Johnston and Baumann (2014) note a long period of "de-sacralization" in post-war American cuisine in which French culinary hegemony was gradually decentred and devalued through a growing emphasis on localness, exoticness, and organicism. In high-end patisserie, we demonstrate a similar process: new objects, techniques, and (overwhelmingly women) creators have entered the patisserie field, problematising assumptions about how capitals of various kinds can be accumulated within and beyond the field. Yet baker-influencers, drawing on a mix of domestic and professional traditions, have not thereby devalued the authority of French patisserie—as we have shown, it continues to be a source of legitimate or pure taste and reward. Striking, however, is that our baker-influencers' content makes almost no acknowledgement of the authority of pastry chefs (despite—for the moment—their continuing leading



position within baking TV). Instead, they present themselves as their own forms of authority and instigators of innovation.

## 4. Surfaces and Depths

Having established the trend for the drip cake, the practitioners, and their labour, the historical precedents of the buttercream celebration cake, and the gendered and classed dynamics of authority at play, we move on to examine the specifics of the drip cake, doing so through a variety of historical and theoretical lenses. We have already argued that this aesthetic relates to the affordances and demands of the platform. Taylor and Keating (2018), as well as Dejmanee (2016), make further salient interpretations of mediatised cake, though neither engages with modernist aesthetic ideals. Doing so produces a broader understanding of the subjectivities expressed in the drip cake, as well as enabling us to consider how creators of drip cakes are reconfiguring the modernist surface, which has previously been understood as a problematic masculine ideal (Cheng, 2013; Sparke, 2010).

It is impossible to separate the surface from the depth of the cake, because the outer appearance relies heavily on the integrity of each interior layer, as does the effect when cut. We will nevertheless address three elements: the iced surface, the drip, and the topping.

### 4.1. The Iced Surface

The “perfect” surface frequently has a “smooth and tight integrity” and this is common across many materials, objects, and historical periods (Kelley, 2013, p. 19). But the modernist surface is distinguished from previous elegant surfaces by being uncompromisingly smooth, pristine, and pure, or “bare” (Kelley, 2013, p. 19), in line with the Bauhaus tenet “less is more.” Since the 1920s, these ideas, afforded by new materials and processes coterminous with industrial manufacture, have informed design. Expanses of glass, and concrete walls smoothed and finished with white Ripolin were perceived as both functional and hygienic. As Le Corbusier said in 1925, “Trash is always abundantly decorated; the luxury object is well-made, neat and clean, pure and healthy, and its bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture” (Le Corbusier, 1987, pp. 87–88). Since Lenôte, French patisserie echoes these ideas. Seemingly untouched by human hand, edges are exacting; layers are distinct, both inside and out.

The drip cake is unswervingly committed to this engineered appearance. Traditionally, rough cake edges are masked with decorative piping, as in the classic Victorian wedding cake and post-war domestic sugar craft. However, the drip cake’s “bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture” (Le Corbusier, 1987, pp. 87–88). Taylor and Keating’s (2018) definition of food porn extends beyond the erotic, to include a pornography of mastery exemplified by images of layer cake perfection: “clean, balanced and geometric...absolute accuracy...demands our attention,” and “delight stems from giving over to the expert and conceding that perfection is unattainable” (p. 317). They note the absolute absence of crumbs in such images, which elsewhere connote rustic authenticity. Our baker-influencers’ photographs are “monumental”; and the cake plinth approaches a universal standard continuous with the modernist dream.

## 4.2. The Drip

If the cake expresses absolute control, the liquid drip presents decorative disorder and “letting go,” analogous to Cairns and Johnston’s (2015) notion of culinary “calibration,” wherein middle-class women must “actively manage their relationships to the extremes of self-control” (p. 154). Sabbath’s original drip was an insult, a splat, an act of comic-book disrespect. In an interview, she cites a dripping comic “horror” font as inspiration (Gardner, 2015). Most interpretations, however, present a neatly decorative and controlled expression. Courtney ensures the drips are regular, resulting in something between the look of upholstery fringing and classical columns. A reclaimed rustic “drizzle” appeared previously, but the drip-cake plinth refuses such haphazard cosiness, ensuring the drip is a straight, even line.

Nevertheless, they must suggest a single, fluid gesture—too much effort results in a “messy,” laboured finish. However expressed, *all* these drips call attention to the quality of the surface below. Minor imperfections become glaring errors.

## 4.3. The Topping

Some drip cakes remain cylindrical and flat, in line with Peggy Porschen’s high-end aesthetic. But lofty piles of home-made or shop-bought sweets provide baker-influencers with easy opportunities to capitalise on their expertise by attracting engagement through visually arresting novelty, simultaneously communicating non-visual qualities of flavour or occasion. The cake is now a plinth, a negligible support. The online audience is hailed by super-democratic cake decorations—already loved and often branded treats, like a ring of Oreos, or chunks of chocolate bar. The topping visualises the calorific excess hidden within those bare sugar walls; the abandon offered by cake: the waste, the excess, the carnival of feminine indulgence.

# 5. Body, Cleanliness, and Control

## 5.1. Cake as Body

We have noted the near absence of bodies from drip cake imagery, though tutorials contain medium shots and close-ups of working hands. The baker-influencers’ bodies are typically white, young, long-haired, compact, and neat. Can these cakes be considered as expressions of an ideal female body? This might seem unlikely given the discord between the ideal post-feminist body and the enthusiastic *consumption* of cake, though as Cairns and Johnston observe, “exemplary [female] citizens are expected *both* to consume *and* to constrain themselves” (2015, p. 156, emphasis added). In a post-feminist context, then, the pleasures of cake might be reclaimed, though this involves a complex set of negotiations.

Dejmanee (2016) suggests that cake stands in for a female body on social media, although she initially explores a metaphorical relationship between a broader range of digital food images and female bodies/sexuality. For her, as for McDonnell (2016), “creamy frosting and sauces dripping down multi-layer cakes” (Dejmanee, 2016, p. 436) signify the libidinous, liquid depths of feminine comfort and desire. Whether our fashionable drip cakes are these things is questionable, especially since Dejmanee contrasts her sensual come-ons with Martha Stewart’s cold minimalism which dominated early 2000s American baking imagery. The drips cannot be understood simply as the libidinous feminine. They promise ooze, but they deliver control. They are not dripping—they are set.

With a slice removed, cakes offer a more literal welcome to gaze inside. Dejmancee (2016) likens the increasingly “intricate, excessive layers” (p. 440) required in cake imagery to the increasing penetration of intimate self-surveillance in post-feminist subjectivity (p. 441). The cut-cake image is homologous to a vagina “simplify[ed] and sweet[ened]” by Brazilian waxing or labiaplasty (p. 441). Dejmancee’s work underlines the reproduction of punitive ideals of perfection, sanitisation, and restraint in both cakes and bodies. A cake can be an ambivalent invitation or exhibition, it seems, depending on fine distinctions in surface quality and finish.

But thinking of this super-controlled cake as a modernist surface opens new directions for critical enquiry. Design history has long acknowledged a relationship between the surfaces and forms of products and human bodily ideals (Maffei, 2009). Cheng (2013) explores the modernist fetishisation of the smooth, bare, and flat, in which “purity, cleanliness, simplicity, anonymity, masculinity, civilisation, technology, intellectual abstractism” are contrasted with notions of “excessive adornment, inarticulate sensuality, femininity, backwardness” (p. 4). What Cheng terms the “undistracted” surface is coded as right and masculine, versus the regressive femininity of the decorative. This set of oppositions bears an almost uncanny resemblance to the relationship between the cake plinth and its drip and topping.

The minimalist modern has become a dominant style in aspirational interiors and international hotels and exemplified by the smartphones through which these digital cultures are experienced—Cheng contends the modernist surface dream persists in ideas of good taste which emphasise the “sleek, the understated” (2013, p. 4). These kinds of “rational” surfaces are routinely described as cool, resonating with Liu and others’ conceptions of cool aesthetics as expressive of the ideologies of techno-rationality (Brown, 2021).

The meanings of the modern surface have been contested, a particular tension between the idea of the bare surface being clad and it being naked. In contemporary baking, a “naked” cake has no lateral frosting, yet has been similarly shaped and scraped on a turntable to create the perfect cylinder. But a super-flat plain buttercream surface with no decor is also naked. Skin or clothing, it gives the impression of tautness and adhesion, newness, impermeability. Cheng (2013) describes the ideal modern man as “hermetically sealed in a flawless skin” (p.10). Self-possessed, he is “luckily impervious to all atmospheres” (p. 10). There is therefore a distinct and contradictory *lack* of vulnerability and intimacy about these particular naked bodies.

Thinking about the impermeability of cake-as-body also invokes class politics. Barnaby (2013) and Kelley (2013) have related the cost and difficulty of creating and maintaining surface to the signalling of class distinctions. Allen (2003, p. 483) notes that the super-hard-surfaced Victorian wedding cake, sometimes replaced by a fake, was both an analogous perfection of the bride (and her body) and a distancing from potentially troubling working-class bodies. Similarly, the drip cake surface suggests Bakhtin’s distinction between the grotesque body with its leakiness, porosity, and absence of boundaries, and the classical body which is laminated, clean, closed, defined, symmetrical, and orderly (Cohen Shabot, 2007, p. 59). Applying these ideas explicitly to women’s (sexualised) bodies, and including height (in contrast to the scorned body of the “low-other”), Kipnis (1992, p. 374) writes that the body—for us, the cake-as-body—is “a refined, orifice-less, laminated surface—homologous to the forms of official high culture that legitimate their authority by references to the values—the highness—inherent in this classical body.” The surface of the cake only *appears* to be laminated (being necessarily pliable, malleable, and prone to subsidence). Like the entrepreneurial middle-class femininity of which it is an expression, it must be constantly worked

on and renewed, the drip signalling the impossibility and excess that compromises any vision of corporeal completion.

### 5.2. Clean Food, Clean Cake

Assessing influencers within the digital foodscape, Goodman and Jaworska (2020) note the prominence of notions of “clean” eating and/or “clean” lifestyles to grammars of good food. Clean has a loosely defined meaning: some variation on a meat-free diet, eschewing various other foods such as fats and sugars. Yet theirs is a broader account of cleanness within which physical activity and mental wellbeing help constitute the clean discourse: Food is “part of a larger regime that includes work on and optimization of the body and the mind” (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020, p. 189). Clean food thereby becomes equated with “aspirational politics of ‘perfection’” (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020, p. 191), further signified by the influencers’ spotless kitchens.

The drip cake may seem an unlikely object through which to think about clean food. Good to eat, and sustaining of family through its role in celebrations, it is however nutritionally “dirty food” since it transgresses official advice about the effects of a high-fat, high-sugar diet. There are attempts to make it “cleaner,” for example, gluten-free and vegan drip cakes, but the digital image cannot be eaten (and baker-influencers do not eat their own creations). Our focus on the *form* of the drip cake and the *manner* of expertise demonstrated reveals that the controlled relationship of the baker-influencer to the sponge layers, the pure buttercream surface, and even the drip represents a demonstration of self-management and clean living. Patisserie is the messiest culinary discipline, yet these baker-influencers make it a hygienic and controllable process. Courtney, for example, barely touches the cake, and her perfect pink nails remain unviolated by the sticky, defrosting surface.

In seeking to make sense of these antinomies of celebration/control, purity/edibility, and cleanliness/dirt, we find striking parallels in Casey and Littler’s (2022) study of British Instagram “cleanfluencer” Mrs. Hinch. Her performance of organizing and scouring another modernist surface—the interior of the modern home—represents a response to the instabilities generated by neoliberalism. The clean surface is a therapeutic project of the self, created through hard “digital identity” labour which can yield profits across a range of capitals. Making a drip cake involves the seemingly endless repetition of certain actions. Such repetition could be seen as torturous and oppressive, but both Mrs. Hinch and our baker-influencers represent it as calming and creative. The clean surface represents the distant possibility of “predictability, sanctuary and safety” (Casey & Littler, 2022, p. 499) in an uncertain and unsafe world, and is increasingly defined as a “tactic for soothing the soul” (Casey & Littler, 2022, p. 502). Yet the drip and toppings also signal the difficulties of such projects and the problematic denials involved. Ouellette (2019, p. 548), discussing decluttering expert Marie Kondo, reflects on her own largely unsuccessful attempts at cleaning, concluding that untidiness is not a personal choice but a “manifestation of late capitalism” and that obsessive concern with order under neoliberal conditions threatens to “kill joy” as much as empower its female practitioners. Our baker-influencers’ management of the surface, the drip, and the topping dramatizes these tensions.

### 5.3. Embodied Skill, Competence, and Cool

Dejmanee claims that in food blogging “the material labour of the female body is erased” (2016, p. 444), as digital technologies effect a compression of time and space (Harvey, 1989). The “cake frosts itself” (Dejmanee,

2016, p. 444). This is true of mega-compilations of novel cake ideas produced by YouTube channels like Yum-Up!, but not entirely true of our baker-influencers. As with Ocejo's (2017) "masters of craft"—male and masculine hipster artisans—there is "cool" cultural capital in the demonstration of fashionable skills and "passionate work" (Brown, 2021), since our baker-influencers' skill and process-sharing also represents the performance of mastery and capital that authenticates their brand and legitimises their authority.

Mediatized forms of instruction do however "make it look easy" partly by editing, though the fluent gestures involved require skill gained only through practice, constituting yet more hidden labour. This allows a further, different expression of "modern cool" (Brown, 2015) which draws on Erving Goffman's notion of "composure." Originally observing dealers in 1960s Las Vegas casinos, he noted the special status accorded to people who demonstrate bodily control in what he called fateful situations. He states that this bodily smoothness of movement is particularly expressed through fine motor control of the hands, and is perceived as especially impressive among those in "easily discredited roles" (Goffman, 2005, p. 226). The precarity of influencer life, successful femininity, and neoliberal life more generally, are poetically expressed and symbolically resolved in these performances of skill in managing risk.

## 6. Conclusion

The unique aesthetic of the drip cake developed within a community of practice comprising professional, semi-professional, amateur, and faux-amateur baking-influencers. It has been informed by the traditions of American retro baking, and from French patisserie and European modernism, co-opting capitals from which women were previously excluded. This marks a departure from the comforting forms of rustic home baking and the feminine, prissy traditions of 20th-century sugar craft, making cake-decorating "cool." The drip cake's online career has followed the trajectory of a fashion trend, baker-influencers actively engaging with creating, promoting, sustaining, and *owning* new aesthetics. They require no endorsement from traditional sources of authority. They move on, but their drip cake has become a new classic.

However, the drip cake poignantly exemplifies the ever-increasing aesthetic labours women are obliged to engage with in post-feminist neoliberal modernity. Women experience a *compromised* agency by making and posting these cakes. Baker-influencers are compelled to compete in the attention economy, raising technical standards and extending the reach and speed of fashion within domestic baking. As with other online lifestyle coaching, their tutorials define the problem they claim to solve: Your cake can—and must—be perfect, through 360 degrees.

But what kind of perfection? Our close analysis of the labour-intensive surfaces of the drip cake reveals that it articulates wider concerns and contradictions of embodied neoliberal, post-feminist femininity. For a dirty, excessive food, these cakes are remarkably clean. For a fun, messy material experience, antithetical to the quotidian work of the spreadsheet, they are remarkably disciplined and bounded. The countless instructions available democratise professional skills, emphasising the accessibility of high-end pleasures, just so long as you can DIY. The effort required is glossed over, the aesthetic relying on an effortlessness that only comes with practice. Post-feminist perfection here merges with ideals of coolness, competence, and composure.

Finally, posting images of fashionable cake sidesteps the issue of the unruly body. Yet they are legitimised by images of women who conform to core bodily ideals; ideals upheld by the cake. The delicate surface could

be viewed as smooth and blemish-free, like perfect skin. But stretched over this flawless cylinder, it is also resolute enough to be a barricade, perhaps symbolising the toughness required to survive, succeed, and become “badass.”

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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