

DISSERTATION

BEAUTIFUL TRANSGRESSIONS: SUBVERSION AND VISIBILITY IN YOUTUBE'S
BEAUTY COMMUNITY

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

BEAUTIFUL TRANSGRESSIONS

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YouTube influencers must navigate the platform's capricious algorithm in order to achieve and maintain visibility online. The attention economy necessitates visibility labor for YouTubers to succeed in digital content creation. In particular, YouTubers must consider advertiser guidelines so that their content gets monetized (and subsequently rendered more visible). Content on YouTube that achieves high visibility tends to reinforce hegemonic logics of self-branding and gender. The beauty community, which produces feminized cultural outputs, is a highly commercial space on YouTube that rewards capitalist-affirming logics of gender and women's empowerment. Working in conversation with scholarship that explores the resistive possibilities of "LeftTube" (leftist YouTube), I highlight subversive tactics that women beauty gurus use without sacrificing their visibility online. Threading in discourse of play and fun, I argue that women beauty gurus can subvert postfeminist, neoliberal norms that discipline and confine gender performance. I first identify the normative genre conventions of the contemporary YouTube beauty community. Then I argue that RawBeautyKristi challenges norms of new momism and the "always on" digital entrepreneur by performing negative affect as a symptom of alienation, decentering western and masculine temporal structures, and complicating aesthetic labor in relation to neoliberal motherhood. Next, I argue that Nappyheadedjojoba performs *platform-specific-intimacy* to activate an ostensibly apolitical audience. Specifically, on YouTube, her incongruous references to makeup relieve tension, she utilizes beauty-specific

terminology to familiarize her politics, she engages respectability politics, and she incorporates self-promotion as relational labor. On Patreon, she positions audience support as promoting creative liberty, she employs self-disclosure in relation to her politics, and she engages ratchetry as resistance. These strategies cultivate a sort of political authenticity. Lastly, Jenna Marbles's playful performance of failure to be part of YouTube's beauty community illuminates the inaccessibility of a seemingly open, democratizing space. By positioning herself as a YouTube viewer who unsuccessfully attempts tutorials, framing excess in contrast to the quest for natural beauty, exaggerating her status as an aging 32-33 year old lady, and flouting YouTube's self-branding conventions, Mourey reveals an attention economy in the beauty community that privileges postfeminist norms of age, beauty, and femininity. Ultimately, my dissertation aims to provide those in precarious positions with tactics to challenge dominant structures in ways that are invisible to those in power.

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Introduction: Why YouTube's Beauty Community?

This dissertation examines case studies that highlight subversion of YouTube's beauty community. In particular, I demonstrate how women on YouTube can challenge neoliberal, postfeminist forces that discipline and constitute the 21st century digital entrepreneurial subject. While these case studies do not serve as outliers who completely reject conventions of visibility, they provide a reference point of ways to complicate, subvert, and dissect these norms. Examining the conventions of the contemporary beauty guru converses with hegemony. Visible YouTubers reinforce the status quo in regards to individualism and entrepreneurialism. Visible *women* YouTubers (a demographic that is highly represented in the beauty community) reinforce this status quo in addition to hegemonic notions of femininity and empowerment. These norms are couched in logics of capitalism and whiteness and are harmful to those who do not fit this narrow social model of success. As such, I examine the transgressive feminist potential in this hegemonic space. In other words, I locate the possibilities of resistance on an oppressive platform.

I first provide a short history of YouTube's beauty community, which dates back to 2006. I then identify contemporary conventions of the beauty community through a genre analysis of contemporary beauty videos. Following this contextualization, I center three case studies that subvert the established conventions: first, I discuss RawBeautyKristi, through which I examine discourses of motherhood and affect through Kara Mary Van Cleaf's digital maternal gaze.¹ Here, I argue that performance negative affect—something that generates high visibility on

¹ Kara Mary Van Cleaf, "The Pleasure of Connectivity: Media, Motherhood, and the Digital Maternal Gaze," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 13, no. 1 (2020): 36-53.

YouTube—need not always be aligned with hegemonic femininity. Next, I analyze Nappyheadedjojoba, through what I call *platform-specific intimacy* on YouTube and Patreon and argue that GRWM videos can be aligned with leftist political commentary. Lastly, I discuss Jenna Marbles and her performance of failure as a means of revealing the ephemeral nature of YouTube’s attention economy. This chapter examines how women’s performance of failure challenges disciplinary conceptualizations of success. These case studies illustrate an alternative future of YouTube that retools and challenges both neoliberalism and postfeminism online.

The word “guru” permeates this online space. The colloquialism, “beauty guru” is a meaningful referent on YouTube. Rojek and Baker note:

The term ‘guru’ traditionally referred to a spiritual master. This adjective is used more liberally now to refer to those with native experience, knowledge and skills associated with the domestic sphere and everyday life. The teacher–student relationship persists, but lifestyle gurus are presented as more accessible, collegial and less obviously religious, than in the past. The old distinction of hierarchy between the master and the follower, which was reproduced in most guru relationships, has been replaced by a more approachable and sustainable alternative. Despite the obvious fame and glamour enjoyed by successful lifestyle gurus, it is as if their lives are lived in co-partnership with their followers.²

Much like a spiritual guru, the lifestyle guru does convey some authority about aspirational lifestyles. She is revered in part for this authority. At the same time, the lifestyle guru becomes so popular from her performance of authenticity. This same dynamic applies to the beauty guru. The “guru” part of this title comes from the influencer’s online popularity. She is a voice of reason and is sought out for advice in the online space. An important element of the online beauty guru is that her offline credentials do not affect her online status. While some YouTube beauty gurus were professional makeup artists prior to their full-time content creation days, most present themselves as amateur creatives.

² Stephanie Baker and Chris Rojek, *Lifestyle Gurus: Constructing Authority and Influence Online* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 18-19.

A few central themes inform my analysis. I consider the *culture and economies* of YouTube in each chapter, as negotiations of visibility are paramount in each case study. Studying algorithms is a central element of this theme, as they quickly evolve and influence identity performance online. Second is a focus on the *neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject*. Visibility online affects material realities that entrepreneurs must contend with. The economic structures and policies that make up contemporary YouTube partly determine what gets produced, what gets viewed, and what gets disseminated. The neoliberal privileging of individual responsibility surrounds YouTube's beauty community and is a hegemonic ideal that faces little pushback online. Third, theorization of the *Internet celebrity* informs my analysis, as contemporary microcelebrity research reveals extensions of, as well as layers and contradictions to celebrity scholarship. As followings of microcelebrities begin to outnumber their mainstream celebrity counterparts, it is useful to consider how Internet celebrity is viewed, both in scholarly and popular communities. We can locate integral questions about audience and parasocial relationships in this body of literature, thus illuminating the microcelebrity's social and cultural roles. Lastly, questions of *feminist potential* on YouTube inform each chapter. Postfeminism is a pervasive cultural force on the platform and thus I consider how women negotiate its influence. A vital contemporary consideration is the embrace of popular feminism and its configuration into reification of capitalist values.

Glatt and Banet-Weiser investigate the radical feminist potential on YouTube through what they call transformational feminism.³ I drill deeper into a particular online subgenre by examining the feminist potential in the beauty space on YouTube. While this space offers

³ Zoe Glatt and Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Productive Ambivalence, Economies of Visibility, and the Political Potential of Feminist YouTubers," in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, eds. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (New York: New York University Press, 2021) 39-56.

potential for illumination of feminist issues, it is also a distinctly commercial space that contains marked contradictions and tensions. In other words, the beauty community is so popular, given its commercial ties. Hegemonic identity performance thrives because it adheres to advertiser interests. In this project, I draw on this question about the transgressive potential of a leftist corner of a capitalist platform by interrogating the transgressive potential of a commercial corner of that same platform.

The overarching aim of my dissertation is to highlight that change is possible, even while working within systemic constraints and limitations. Exploring the playful, everyday transgressions of beauty YouTubers helps both audiences see their own agency in interpretation (following the intellectual tradition of cultural studies), and content creators push the boundaries of a seemingly normative digital space. Without rejecting the demands of YouTube's attention economy, the beauty YouTubers I examine turn generic conventions on their heads—whether this be by combining negative affect with motherhood narratives, using makeup application in incongruous ways, or by performing failure to be the paragon of successful femininity. Each case study reinforces the political potential of a seemingly apolitical space—in fact, I urge fellow scholars to examine seemingly apolitical sites as spaces that reinforce, converse with, and/or challenge dominant ideologies.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the contemporary sociotechnical conventions of YouTube's attention economy?
How do they manifest in YouTube's beauty community?
- 2) How do women in YouTube's beauty community subvert and/or challenge these norms while still maintaining visibility on the platform?
- 3) What are the limits of subversive potential on YouTube's beauty community?

Literature Review

Culture and Economies of Digital Platforms

In this literature review, I map the technical and cultural landscape of YouTube to contextualize the possibilities and limitations of the online beauty community. Examining the culture and economies of digital platforms highlights the ways that platforms are assigned cultural value, as well as the economic structures in which influencers are affected. New media and labor centers around neoliberalism's influences on digital entrepreneurship and explains how content creators are called upon to brand their identities. Microcelebrity shows us the cultural and economic power of influencers, and postfeminism explores the ways in which women content creators and viewers alike are disciplined (while being told they are empowered) online.

Although they have been hailed as being democratizing spaces of free expression and creator agency, digital platforms are constrained by technical and social factors that govern what gets seen (or even allowed) online. These factors include privileging of dominant identity categories, limiting possibilities of interactivity, obscuring algorithms, and incentivizing online visibility through hegemonic identity performance.

Digital platforms privilege interactivity and audience engagement through what Jenkins et al⁴ and Burgess and Green call a participatory model of culture.⁵ Affordances such as liking, commenting, and sharing invite active audience engagement. Digital media has made a culture of distribution evolve into a culture of circulation.⁶ The participatory model moves beyond simply reacting to or disseminating existing content. Digital ethnographic research reveals that “‘participatory culture’ is one in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively

⁴ Henry Jenkins et al, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Society* (New York, New York University Press, 2018), 2.

⁵ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 12.

⁶ Jenkins et al, 2.

participate in the creation and circulation of new content.”⁷ This definition of participatory culture foregrounds a cultural shift towards retrofitted, remixed material that extends or complicates online discourse. Through this model of engagement, then, audiences become “prosumers” in which the line between passive viewer and active content creator becomes blurred. YouTube’s beauty community encompasses this cultural phenomenon, given community members’ rapid circulation of related content across platforms.

The technical, social, and cultural functions that invite prosumer participation online “afford possibility for collectivities, communities, and networked publics.”⁸ This shift in audience engagement has informed claims to democratized platforms in which all are empowered to have a voice in the digital sphere.⁹ However, scholarly attention has turned to *who* is invited to participate online and *how*.¹⁰ Working class communities, women, queer-identified folks, disabled individuals, and people of color are often left to the margins of digital participation on commercial platforms that privilege dominant identities. In fact, as noted by popular columnist Mary Retta, lifestyle content on YouTube is overwhelmingly white and upper-middle class.¹¹ Thus, in YouTube’s beauty space, whiteness is deemed neutral and apolitical.

Technical constraints can also limit interactivity, further complicating the democratizing ethos of new media technology. Burgess and Green note that increased monetization of amateur content threatens the participatory potential of internet users. Copyright strikes on reused and remixed content limit visibility, thus interfering with user motivation to circulate content. While

⁷ Burgess and Green, 19.

⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture* (New York, New York University Press, 2012), 88.

⁹ Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 352.

¹⁰ Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

¹¹ Mary Retta, “Black Women YouTubers are Still Fighting to be Heard on LeftTube,” *Teen Vogue*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/black-women-youtubers-are-still-fighting-to-be-heard-on-lefttube>.

Burgess and Green specifically reference how “copyright logics are an especially acute challenge to the vernacular meme cultures of YouTube,” these logics are commonplace across digital platforms that use material that has copyright potential.¹²

Governing content creator behavior does not just stop at monetization and copyright. While platforms position themselves as progressive and egalitarian content-delivery systems that encourage creator autonomy¹³ (as content creators are often articulated as entrepreneurial, brave risk-takers¹⁴), those same platforms implement algorithms that discipline content creators.¹⁵ Algorithms are so pervasive online due to their effectiveness in courting audiences to advertisers.¹⁶ A semi-automated content moderation system, algorithms track user behavior in order to recommend engaging content. Algorithms support the goal of sustained user engagement, as they curate platform experiences for niche audiences. As audiences grow increasingly fragmented, getting audience attention is an essential part of platform culture. This is where Bishop’s political economic approach to YouTube research sheds some light on algorithmic influence: “YouTube is owned by Google, a profit-orientated company that produces audiences as commodities for advertisers.”¹⁷ This focus on ownership illuminates not just that audiences become commodified for advertisers, but how content curation categorizes these audiences.

¹² Burgess and Green, 51.

¹³ Gillespie, 352.

¹⁴ Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, & Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 14.

¹⁵ Jack Andersen, “Archiving, Ordering, and Searching: Search Engines, Algorithms, Databases, and Deep Mediatization,” *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 8 (2018): 1135-1150.

¹⁶ Sophie Bishop, “Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 69-84.

¹⁷ Bishop, 70.

Commonly utilized demographic information is age and gender—as such, content creators will perform hegemonic gender roles to be algorithmically recognizable.¹⁸ There are some liberatory implications for monetizing feminized labor—it breaks a longstanding tradition of leaving feminine labor unpaid and places monetary value on feminine knowledges of collectivity.¹⁹ However, the detrimental implications of normative gender performances are not without consequence. It can constrain identity performance and punish those who do not align with narrow conceptions of “acceptable” gender performance. For instance, Bishop observes that some beauty vloggers select this genre not because they are inherently passionate about cosmetics, but due to its algorithmically recognizable status, which makes them more likely to gain or retain online visibility. This phenomenon of “rationalization” powerfully exemplifies how algorithms function not just as demand predictors from audiences, but as content creators.²⁰ In this sense, algorithms train neoliberal subjects to produce normative, advertiser-friendly content. Failure to do so is marked by the “threat of invisibility” in which content is demonetized, hidden from audiences, and in some cases, removed from platforms altogether.²¹

It is important to note that while algorithms do produce working conditions and reinforce ideologies both on and offline²², questions of creator agency must be accounted for in algorithmic scholarship. A simplistic approach to algorithms that sees content creators as only producing algorithmically-recognizable content can be at risk of technological determinism.²³

¹⁸ Bishop

¹⁹ Nicholas-Brie Guarriello, “Never Give Up, Never Surrender: Game Livestreaming, Neoliberal Work, and Personalized Media Economies,” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 8 (2019): 1757.

²⁰ Philip Napoli, “On Automation in Media Industries: Integrating Algorithm Media Production into Media Industries Scholarship,” *Media Industries Journal* 1, no. 1 (2014): 34.

²¹ Taina Bucher, “Want to Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 7 (2012): 1164-1180.

²² Kelly Cotter, “Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 4 (2019): 895-913.

²³ Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 27.

Conversely, a social constructionist approach to content creation perhaps extends *too* much creative liberty to social media entertainers, as the disciplinary function of algorithms is strong. A more nuanced approach would be the social shaping of technology perspective, which “sees technology and society as continually influencing one another.”²⁴ No matter the platform a content creator uses, there is potential for mutually influential pull between creator motivation and algorithmic demand. As illustrated in my case studies, content creators negotiate algorithmic discipline in ambivalent ways that call attention to constraining platform conventions. However, after some time in the social media industry, the social influences of algorithms extend to offline ways of thinking.²⁵

Since platform algorithms remain opaque—even to content creators—there are several strategies that content creators utilize to adhere to algorithmic demands. The first is that they will perform identities based on what they have seen garner success online. Despite individual claims to authenticity online, digital content tends to have distinct genres that showcase similar “modes of presentation,” tone of voice, and vocabulary.²⁶ Another means of keeping up with algorithmic demands is through employing what Bishop terms “algorithmic gossip.”²⁷ Influencers provide tips for gaming the algorithm on sites like Facebook groups and offline meetups.²⁸ Before it shut down, the Internet Creators Guild, a non-profit organization that supported sustainable labor among influencers, was a popular site for algorithmic gossip. Gossip can have a liberatory function among marginalized communities. In the context of algorithms, it can offer power to the precarious online worker. As algorithms are something of platformic “lore” for digital creatives,

²⁴ Baym, 27.

²⁵ Andersen.

²⁶ Bishop, 69.

²⁷ Sophie Bishop, “Managing Visibility on YouTube Through Algorithmic Gossip,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 11-12 (2019): 2589-2606.

²⁸ Bishop, 2595.

content creators can use forums, chats, and meetups to provide tools and tips. This practice is complicated, however, as it can also serve to reinforce normative practices online. Discussions about achieving success on digital platforms is often coded language about performing normative identity practices.

The reward for adhering to algorithmic demands on platforms is visibility. In an “economy of attention,” garnering audience attention through likes, comments, shares, responses, and remixes, results in higher digital status.²⁹ Succeeding in the attention economy is equivalent to succeeding online—while accruing this kind of social capital does not necessarily directly offer financial gain, it does afford opportunities of exposure, which can ultimately lead to economic growth for the individual entrepreneur. In other words, digital success is marked by factors other than yearly earnings. Performing hegemonic identity is algorithmically recognizable, and subsequently grants visibility. Yet to avoid a technological deterministic perspective, we must consider which content is useful and resonant to new media audiences and creators.

Scholarship indicates that performances of intimacy contribute to visibility online.³⁰ Exploring digital intimate publics is an emerging phenomenon in platform research and points to the essentiality of relationship-building (or at least the appearance of a relationship) with viewers and followers online. Citing Berlant, Banet-Weiser notes that intimate publics are “shared spaces that are structured by expectations that the consumers within a given intimate public share a worldview and an emotional connection that is bound together by a common historical experience.”³¹ Cultivating communities is a foundational element of new media logics. One way

²⁹ Marwick, 143.

³⁰ Cotter, 905.

³¹ Banet-Weiser, 218.

to curate a community is through intimacy. Particularly for women content creators, the “best friend” or “big sister” role is paramount. Interestingly, establishing a sense of intimacy on digital platforms has less to do with *how much* content creators interact with their audiences and more so *how* they curate their identities for viewers and followers. Confessional culture positions content creators as both intimate and authentic.³² Content creators will disclose painful or intimate parts of their lives in order to curate intimacy, thus complicating the public/private divide. In the past few years in particular, content creators utilize what Berryman and Kavka have coined a “currency of tears” in which content creators are granted visibility for documenting and disseminating their breakdowns, anxieties, and insecurities. Curiously, this confessional culture that is foregrounded by a “mood economy”³³ generally garners more success online than offline. Digital content creators note receiving positive responses of closeness and intimacy from their followers than those who disclose personal information in interpersonal relationships offline.³⁴

Authenticity is also important to visible digital identity performance.³⁵ While there are discrepancies in authenticity performance across platforms (Instagram, for instance, tends to feature glamorous, aspirational content and foregrounds conspicuous consumption), the ubiquitous always-on “lifecaster-life narrative” positions authenticity performance as ubiquitous across platforms. Critical-cultural scholars challenge the notion of a “true, core self” and note that authenticity is socially constructed. In the case of digital media, claims to authenticity are found in performances of consistency.³⁶ This is why, in cases like beauty/lifestyle vlogger Zoe

³² Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, “Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, Self-Exposure and the Productivity of Negative Affect,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 86.

³³ Jennifer Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁴ Berryman and Kavka, 91.

³⁵ Banet-Weiser.

³⁶ Marwick, 120.

Sugg, we might see content creators perform the same youthful selves through which they started their digital careers as long as a decade prior.

On digital platforms, authenticity performance is highly controlled and often contains material cues of selfhood. Marwick reminds us that while content creators make claims to self-disclosure, what they choose to disclose remains calculated. This results in what she calls an “edited self,” which “is “an entrepreneur whose product is a neatly packaged, performed identity. When people use social media to self-brand, they are encouraged to regulate themselves along the well-traveled paths of enterprise culture, regardless of how much unpaid time this effort might require.”³⁷ This “enterprising self” may have some unique turns of phrase or leave in linguistic mistakes, but they must ultimately align with a neoliberal, advertiser-friendly identity.

Microcelebrity Online

As digital content creators gain popularity and recognition, scholars have tried to make sense of the “influencer” phenomenon through celebrity studies literature. However, there are some marked differences between mainstream celebrity and digital celebrity. Coined by Theresa Senft, the term *microcelebrity* encompasses content creators who achieve popularity by performing ordinary, mundane selves who engage in relational labor with audiences.³⁸ Microcelebrity is a unique phenomenon, distinct from traditional celebrity, as the microcelebrity gains visibility and popularity from performances of the everyday.³⁹ As noted by Usher, this results in conceptualization of the *applied* celebrity who engages in parasocial relationships with their following (often through claims to intimacy or authenticity) in order to achieve popularity.⁴⁰ In

³⁷ Marwick, 195.

³⁸ Theresa Senft, *CamGirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008).

³⁹ Crystal Abidin, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018).

⁴⁰ Bethany Usher, “Rethinking Microcelebrity: Key Points in Practice, Performance, and Purpose,” *Celebrity Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 172.

this case, authenticity is not something audiences historically have had to dig for, but is the very attribute launching the microcelebrity into popularity. In the era of the studio star, celebrities' images were carefully curated by film studios. The "real person" behind this image largely remained a mystery, only to be partially revealed through television talk show appearances.⁴¹ In the era of the microcelebrity, influencers' claims to authenticity are expected by audiences. Abidin summarizes this shift, arguing, "where traditional celebrities practice a sense of separation and distance from their audiences, microcelebrities have their popularity premised on feelings of connection and interactive responsiveness with their audiences."⁴² This phenomenon marks what Turner calls the "demotic turn," in which "ordinary people" achieve visibility online through documentation of mundane, everyday life.⁴³ While cosmetics content may seem foregrounded in conspicuous consumption and glamorous identity performance, the beauty community's move towards lifestyle vlogs and "chatty get ready with me" videos takes into account the deep emotional labor that beauty work necessitates. Visible beauty gurus must not only demonstrate skill with makeup application; they must be accessible to their audiences, branding themselves as ordinary and "just like you."

Microcelebrity is theorized as an act, rather than an identity category. Marwick argues, "in the broadcast era, celebrity was something a person was; in the Internet era, microcelebrity is something people do."⁴⁴ The size of a microcelebrity's following, while relevant to the microcelebrity herself, is not an essential consideration. What is paramount in considerations of Internet celebrity then, is the process one utilizes to achieve visibility online—oftentimes, these

⁴¹ Christine Becker, *It's the Pictures that Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 31.

⁴² Abidin, 11.

⁴³ Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), 92.

⁴⁴ Alice Marwick, "Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy," *Public Culture* 27, no. 1 (2015): 139.

acts mimic those of celebrities who already have a sizable following.⁴⁵ As such, the strategies employed by highly visible and entry-level beauty gurus may look remarkably similar. Beauty YouTubers who are just starting out see followers and audiences as fans; they speak to the public as though they are already popular.

Microcelebrity must work within the constraints of digital platforms, but marks what Marshall observes as a move from representational culture to presentational culture. Representational culture relies on traditional media to incorporate various identity categories that encourage audience identification. Identities are neatly packaged in mediated representations, and are there for audiences to consume. *Presentational culture*, on the other hand, is “where the self and the individual are more prominent in constructing what are really micropublics of associations.”⁴⁶ This shift incorporates a move towards curating one’s own fan base and being in charge of one’s own image online. Here we see a move towards what Senft observes as a public formed by texts and circulation. In a presentational culture, microcelebrities “specularize” their selves, curating identities that demand to be watched, consumed, and disseminated by audiences.⁴⁷ While microcelebrities claim certain niches and perform recognizable genres on social media platforms, their success depends on utilizing platforms to brand themselves as authentic.⁴⁸ We must, however, consider another layer regarding the advent of multi-channel networks (commonly referred to as MCNS) such as Gleam Futures (a popular MCN for beauty gurus). As influencers accrue more social, economic, and cultural capital, they can opt to be managed by a team. This complicates the “calibrated amateurism” that Abidin identifies and

⁴⁵ Marwick, *Instafame*, 156.

⁴⁶ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xxxiv.

⁴⁷ Marshall, xxxiv.

⁴⁸ Marwick, *Status Update*.

blurs the line between microcelebrity and traditional celebrity in the opposite direction than previously mentioned.⁴⁹ As noted by Usher, “Gleam Future microcelebrities now have much less in common with Senft’s camgirls than they do with mainstream reality TV personalities such as the Kardashians.”⁵⁰ Questions about agency in self-branding which were historically relegated to traditional celebrity now become relevant to Internet celebrity. Microcelebrity creates the illusion of the “self made entrepreneur,” but in reality there is sometimes a team producing the image of the “best friend in her bedroom.”

The transition from independent, authentic entrepreneur to social media star is indicative of digital media platforms’ turn to what Cunningham and Craig call formalized social media entertainment.⁵¹ Social media content creation is now a multi-billion dollar industry and with that, influencers can make up to tens of thousands of dollars from ad revenue and brand deals in one post or video alone. In the early days of social media, creators were reputed as amateurs simply sharing their lives. In 2023, working in the social media industry is a recognizable career. Gone are the days of the amateur creative; instead, we hear of household name influencers, some of whom are making millions of dollars each year. While the industrial conditions have changed in the wake of formalization, social media’s sociocultural logics of authenticity and intimacy remain in place. Thus, digital microcelebrities must navigate a tension in which they earn a great deal of money and have formal teams working with them, yet must perform an amateur identity to their audiences. In other words, the cultural logics of YouTube condition microcelebrities to obscure the industrial conditions in which they work. As such, shedding light on these conditions

⁴⁹ Abidin, 91.

⁵⁰ Usher, 185.

⁵¹ Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, “Introduction,” in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, eds. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 1-17.

is a transgression. Doing this explicitly often results in decreased visibility and demonetization. In the following chapters of this dissertation, I demonstrate how women YouTubers make sense of these industrial conditions in creative ways that do not undermine their visibility.

New Media Labor

Central to discussions of new media work is neoliberalism. Broadly defined, neoliberalism is a class power restoration project that is marked by government deregulation, increased privatization of industries, and anti-worker organization efforts⁵². In the words of Harvey, “neoliberalism...proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”⁵³ Neoliberalism came into popular consciousness in the Reagan and Thatcher era, as both figures drastically cut welfare spending.⁵⁴ Additionally, Reagan attacked labor union organization efforts, which informed a cultural perception that individuals’ freedom of choice did not involve participation in collective advocacy. Changes in economic regulation and policy affect citizen subjects, emphasizing self-surveilling beings who embody Foucault’s notion of “homo economicus” which is “the application of economic analysis to all phenomena.”⁵⁵ As such, neoliberalism ignited a move towards entrepreneurialism⁵⁶ and individualism. Increasingly, media work is on a freelance basis—also known as the “gig economy.” Thus, worker protections are continuously under threat and with that, workers are asked to assume personal responsibility for their successes and

⁵² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵³ Harvey, 2.

⁵⁴ Harvey.

⁵⁵ Carolyn Hardin, “Finding the ‘Neo’ in Neoliberalism, *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 207.

⁵⁶ Christina Scharff, “The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism: Mapping the Contours of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 6 (2016): 107-122.

failures. Digital content creation reflects these neoliberal logics. Despite discrepancies in focus, definitions of neoliberalism tend to capture the notion of the entrepreneurial individual who becomes a commodified brand. Pertinent systemic influences in new media work include feminized labor, class, and responses to precarious working conditions.

The feminization of work is in part a response to neoliberalization.⁵⁷ There is a focus on emotional labor in new media work. Relatedly, the rise of the “enterprising” neoliberal self exacerbates gendered expectations and inequalities in media work, particularly in Post-Fordist conditions of post-industrial, service, and immaterial labor.⁵⁸ The entrepreneurial self is still largely characterized as male, yet women entrepreneurs garner success in visibility in traditionally feminine spaces.⁵⁹ Digital media work in particular reinforces gender roles and emotional labor through what Brooke Erin Duffy calls “aspirational labor.”⁶⁰ This is a form of hope labor, which is also future-oriented, but is expressly gendered due to the traditionally feminine practices of community-building. Aspirational labor positions women in new media as fundamentally future oriented—as such, they invest in their present selves, often working long hours and adhering to multi-skill demands in order to make their “big break” and achieve visibility online. It is characterized by passion work, brand evangelism, and devotion to the self as entrepreneurial brand. Demands for affective labor and curation of follower bases via sociality point to not only the self as brand, but the *feminized self as brand*. In keeping with the poor working conditions of feminized labor, aspirational labor is often uncompensated. This form of labor is in direct response to neoliberalism, as it functions to mitigate a “political economy of

⁵⁷ *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, eds. Ana Sofia Elias et al (New York: Macmillan Publisher Ltd, 2017).

⁵⁸ McRobbie.

⁵⁹ Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

⁶⁰ Erin Duffy.

insecurity.’”⁶¹ In this context, future security is not guaranteed through long-term contracts or a physical workplace; thus, women entrepreneurs devote their present selves to future visibility through feminized labor.

Erin Duffy identifies the “passion-payout” solution as fundamental to aspirational labor⁶²—other scholars of gender and labor note similar emphasis on a “do what you love” discourse.⁶³ In viewing the self as a commodified brand (and subsequently blurring the lines of labor and leisure), creative work is positioned as a means of self-actualization.⁶⁴ This is true for all genders in entrepreneurial positions—however, expression of this self-actualized creative falls largely on women due to its reliance on positive affect.⁶⁵ “Do what you love” discourse is a prime example of this positive affect and is positioned as a solution to working condition-related anxieties and insecurities. Banet-Weiser identifies how responsibility for lack of female representation in tech is relegated to the individual, positioning it as a “confidence gap” that can be mitigated by doing what one is passionate about online.⁶⁶ Aesthetic labor (or “beauty work”) is reframed as “play,” positioning the money and time that goes into doing one’s makeup as a means of experimenting with one’s identity.⁶⁷ This exemplifies a conflation of aspirational consumption and production as mediated identity performance. It is important to note, however, that this “cosmetic play” is a luxury that is not afforded to all identity categories. Performing

⁶¹ Erin Duffy, 10.

⁶² Erin Duffy, 175.

⁶³ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁶⁴ Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

⁶⁵ Scharff, 113.

⁶⁶ Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, 30.

⁶⁷ Michelle Lazar, “‘Seriously Girly Fun!’: Recontextualizing Aesthetic Labor as Fun and Play in Cosmetics Advertising,” in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, eds. Ana Sofia Elias et al (New York: Macmillan Publisher Ltd, 2017), 51-65

hegemonic femininity via aesthetic labor can be a form of class mobility for working classes⁶⁸ and an embodied act of respectability politics for women of color.⁶⁹

As established prior, feminized labor has been theorized as a form of class mobility in a neoliberal landscape. Yet this sense of class mobility is usually illusory and/or necessitates financial safety nets.⁷⁰ More broadly, the entrepreneurial self is characterized as calculated, ambitious, and risk-taking, yet “the most common shared trait among entrepreneurs is access to financial capital—family money, an inheritance, or a pedigree and connections that allow for access to financial stability...it’s usually that access to money which allows them to take risks.”⁷¹ This is particularly evident in the digital economy, given its propensity for free labor.⁷² The neoliberal emphasis on investment in a future self ignores present well-being and implies safety nets and backup plans.

In addition to the material consequences of neoliberalism for working class communities, neoliberal subjectivity privileges cultivation and expansion of middle class sensibility.⁷³ In response to the threat of working class solidarity, middle class values are instilled on cultural workers as a form of control. Yet it is important to note that these values of family, individualistic entrepreneurship, and self-actualization through work are not accessible to everyone. In fact, a middle-class neoliberal ethos necessitates that working class communities continue to be exploited and oppressed in order to “lift up” the entrepreneurial subject.⁷⁴ For instance, a female YouTuber might need to work long hours in order to fulfill the “always on”

⁶⁸ McRobbie.

⁶⁹ Elias et al, 12.

⁷⁰ McRobbie.

⁷¹ Erin Duffy, 223.

⁷² Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33-58.

⁷³ Harvey, 61-2.

⁷⁴ Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20.

demands of new media work. In order to save time, she might “empower” herself by hiring a housekeeper (a job that is notoriously low paid and filled by marginalized communities). Thus, the entrepreneurial opportunities that are afforded to the middle-class media worker do not extend to the working class. They also may not have access to the conventions and performances of a middle class sensibility. Scharff argues that neoliberalism produces “Otherness” in demonstrating what the ideal neoliberal subject is not and that “the subject of self invention is predominantly middle class.”⁷⁵ The neoliberal subject has the tools and resources to self-brand and has the cultural capital to perform this “authentic” selfhood in ways that are culturally recognizable to audiences.⁷⁶ Thus we can see that classed exclusions have material and ideological consequences for those in the margins.

Media workers’ negotiations with and responses to a neoliberal landscape can range from reifying to transgressive. It is common for digital media workers to have several jobs at once—sometimes out of survival and sometimes for self-actualization.⁷⁷ Media workers might reify neoliberal ideology due to a sense of personal responsibility to succeed,⁷⁸ but they may also not be able to risk transgressive behavior. Thus, it is important not to assume lack of immediate resistance as mere consent to being a cog in the media machine. However, for the remainder of this section, I consider what Gill and Pratt refer to as the “becomings” of resistance in media work⁷⁹ because the advocacy that media creatives engage across industries can provide a roadmap for digital media subversion. Looking to how those in more established industries

⁷⁵ Scharff, 109.

⁷⁶ Erin Duffy, 134.

⁷⁷ McRobbie.

⁷⁸ Scharff.

⁷⁹ Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt: Precarity and Cultural Work in the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness, and Cultural Work,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7-8 (2008): 19.

challenge systemic injustice can help social media influencers take from the film and television industries' tactical playbook, so to speak.

Mutual talk is a commonly identified tactic of resistance in media labor scholarship. Caldwell points to the resistive potential of gossip, positioning it as “unruly” means of discussing trade practices and negotiations with fellow members of an oppressed group.⁸⁰ While this practice can necessitate a physical workplace, Salamon identifies how digital freelancers use tools at their disposal to engage in resistive practices such as using email listservs to facilitate boycotts, strikes, and labor organizations.⁸¹ Ultimately, they use these tools to “facilitate dialogic public communication about matters of shared concern, which include fair contracts and pay for freelance contributors and the ability to protect their creators' rights.”⁸² Keeping morale high and participation consistent in digital resistance can be difficult, however, as evidenced by the lack of interest in the Internet Creators Guild that was meant to advocate for YouTuber labor rights (it eventually had to shut down). This is the type of issue that Jodi Dean has identified as the downfall of communicative capitalism. Dean asserts that what is regarded as access, inclusion, discussion, and participation online is instead a “zero institution” that maintains an illusion of the above qualities but solely focuses on the “intense circulation of content” that “occludes the antagonism necessary for politics.”⁸³ In cases of media work, particularly using media to discuss workplace politics, connectivity does not necessarily equate to collectivity. It is important to not fault the media worker when considering failed revolutionary practices online, as digital platforms are built to facilitate an “infrastructure of neoliberalism” under the guise of democracy

⁸⁰ John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 66.

⁸¹ Errol Salamon, “Digitizing Freelance Media Labor: A Class of Workers Negotiates Entrepreneurialism and Activism,” *New Media & Society* 22, no. 1 (2020): 116.

⁸² Salamon, 118.

⁸³ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 24.

in order to maintain class power.⁸⁴ What is sold to media workers as politically consequential is actually a tool used to maintain the status quo.

Refusal is another tactic at the disposal of media workers. In the context of the “quantified neoliberal workplace,” refusal to be surveilled is registered as a political act.⁸⁵ With data disclosure baked into digital platforms, however, this can be a difficult tactic for digital media workers to fully realize. Refusal of work is a popular assertion among autonomist Marxists, but the autonomist Marxist tradition is contested among contemporary media scholars.⁸⁶ For instance, collective liberation, as positioned by the autonomists, is informed by qualities of cooperativeness, participation, and creativity; yet those same attributes inform reification of digital capitalism.⁸⁷ Gill and Pratt also remind us that the “emphasis upon affect as positive, transgressive potential has made it difficult for autonomist writers to see the other roles affect may play— not simply in resisting capital but binding us to it.”⁸⁸ Put simply, the very same communicative practices that can facilitate worker resistance have been capitalized in media work. Media workers often must act within the constraints of their industrial affordances, limiting political potential.

Contemporary Feminism(s)

Because beauty YouTube is so heavily dominated by women, we must consider the current ways that women’s identities are constituted online. Historically, media has always played a role in disciplining “appropriate” femininity. While YouTube might suggest that it allows everyone to get money simply from “being themselves,” feminist scholarship suggests that notions of the self

⁸⁴ Dean, 23.

⁸⁵ Phoebe Moore and Andrew Robinson, “The Quantified Self: What Counts in the Neoliberal Workplace,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 11 (2016): 2787.

⁸⁶ McRobbie.

⁸⁷ Gill and Pratt, 19.

⁸⁸ Gill and Pratt, 20.

are intimately tied to dominant ideals of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Given postfeminism's popularity from the 1990s onward, I contextualize women's identity performances within the feminism du jour.

Postfeminism, as noted by Rosalind Gill is a "sensibility" and a "critical object"⁸⁹ that came into popularity in the early '90s.⁹⁰ Those who uphold postfeminist ideologies credit second-wave feminism for paving a path for modern women to be empowered. Postfeminism emphasizes choice discourse, framing any choice a woman makes as worthy of uncritical celebration.⁹¹ Generally, postfeminist ideology is marked by the makeover paradigm, the move from sexual objectification to subjectification, and self-discipline. In essence, postfeminism posits prefeminist ideals as postfeminist freedoms.⁹² Women are called upon to surveil their bodies under the guise of empowerment.

Much like neoliberalism, postfeminism is also baked into YouTube's platform logics. McRobbie, providing a foundation for contemporary postfeminist scholarship posits postfeminism as (liberal) feminism "taken into account," yet "repudiated."⁹³ In postfeminist discourse, McRobbie observes, radical feminism is left untouched, thus centering politics of inclusion and exclusion as informing postfeminist reasoning. Extending notions of "taking feminism into account," Mary Douglas Vavrus contends that the "post" of "postfeminism" indicates "belief that our society has reached a moment in which we are living out our lives on a

⁸⁹ Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 147-166.

⁹⁰ Rottenberg, 9.

⁹¹ Shelly Budgeon, "Individualized Femininity and Feminist Politics of Choice," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 3 (2015): 311.

⁹² Gill.

⁹³ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 8, 12.

level playing field.”⁹⁴ In the same breath in crediting liberal feminists for equality, those engaging in postfeminist discourse blame modern day feminists for unnecessarily complicating women’s lives, embodying what Budgeon identifies as dis-identification with collective feminism.⁹⁵ Scholars observe postfeminism as celebrating individuated notions of choice (and claiming the act of choice itself as innately political),⁹⁶ privileging consumption as liberation,⁹⁷ incorporating a “makeover regime” in which physical transformation is paramount,⁹⁸ and placing responsibility for health and success on the individual.⁹⁹ There is also a classed element to postfeminism, both in its disdain for and removal from working class solidarity, and performance of a middle class sensibility.¹⁰⁰ In essence, these qualities contribute to a depoliticized sense of self who is self-actualized and empowered through entrepreneurial identity performance and consumption.

Scholarship on postfeminism has started to account for affect. Rottenberg¹⁰¹ and Douglas Vavrus¹⁰² both observe how claims to the decline in women’s happiness are attributed to collective feminism. Rottenberg extends this conversation in dissecting discourse about (white, middle class) women’s happiness as equivalent to empowerment. Furthermore, Genz notes how the “experience economy” necessitates authenticity performance that privileges the affective in mediated identity performance.¹⁰³ Since postfeminism is steeped in brand culture, theorizations

⁹⁴ Catherine Squires et al, “What is This ‘Post’ in Postracial, Postfeminist...Fill in the Blank?,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2010): 222.

⁹⁵ Budgeon, 306.

⁹⁶ Budgeon.

⁹⁷ Stephanie Genz, “My Job is Me: Postfeminist Celebrity Culture and the Gendering of Authenticity,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 545-561.

⁹⁸ Gill.

⁹⁹ Marissa Doshi, “Barbies, Goddesses, and Entrepreneurs: Discourses of Gendered Digital Embodiment in Women’s Health Apps,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 41, no. 2 (2018): 183-203.

¹⁰⁰ Doshi, 190.

¹⁰¹ Rottenberg.

¹⁰² Squires et al.

¹⁰³ Genz, 546.

of affect demonstrate its essential role in binding consumers to dominant social norms. Part of the aforementioned emotional labor in the beauty community is affective performance (i.e. breakdown vlogs and no-makeup videos). As demonstrated in chapter 2, however, affective performance can be subversive in contexts of motherhood and alienation.

Given the recent seemingly warm embrace of and identification with feminism, notions of postfeminism have evolved. In conversation with Banet-Weiser and Rottenberg, Gill notes that despite this feminist identification (which she coins “post-postfeminism”), the kinds of feminism that are touted as empowering contemporary girls and women actually maintain the same logics of postfeminism.¹⁰⁴ Popular feminism, coined by Banet-Weiser, theorizes the recent cultural embrace of and claim to feminist identity. Banet-Weiser posits popular feminism as a form of capitalistic, media-friendly networked feminism that is made possible by visibilities and affordances of contemporary media. It is decidedly not angry—another development of the aforementioned affective turn—and centers notions of confidence, competence, and capacity. This “confidence movement,”¹⁰⁵ as Banet-Weiser explains, is in response to the understanding of women’s inequalities and lack of industrial representation as caused by women’s lack of confidence and embodiment of shame. As such, it focuses on the empowered individual whose participation in capitalism is indicative of social progress. In other words, the “empowered woman” is an idealized economic subject whose confidence allows her inclusion in existing systems and institutions. Thus, notions of change are embedded in corporate, capitalist ideologies. Here, Banet-Weiser notes popular feminism’s debt to liberal feminism, given its focus on inclusion and exclusion. The “empowered woman” is a popular trope in YouTube’s

¹⁰⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser et al, “Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation,” *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (2020): 13.

¹⁰⁵ Banet-Weiser, 48.

beauty community and contains elements of popular feminism. Most evident is the notion of cosmetic purchases and application as empowering forms of authentic self expression.

Relatedly, neoliberal feminism is theorized by Rottenberg, and considers the function and utility of gender roles in a neoliberal landscape.¹⁰⁶ Its primary function is to account for reproduction and care work (thus accounting for the future of productive workers), while simultaneously constituting present idealized economic subjects. The negotiation of these qualities is found in discourses of *balanced* womanhood, particularly in regards to work/life balance. Rottenberg argues that neoliberal feminism positions motherhood as a key facet of the feminine experience, yet invites discursive and material developments (i.e. egg-freezing) that frame motherhood as something to pursue *after* achieving economic success. As such, women must presently invest in themselves as economic subjects so that they can be good, competent mothers in the future. Important to note here is the essentiality of existing economic and social privilege in neoliberal feminism—empowerment is not collective and instead celebrates the woman who can “rise up” without accounting for those in marginalized raced and classed positions. Instead there is an “affective investment in the status quo,¹⁰⁷” thus individuating empowerment. Much like in postfeminism, Rottenberg identifies how neoliberal feminism frames happiness as the ultimate “social good.¹⁰⁸” This affective investment and seemingly empowering commitment to balance are qualities that the case studies in my dissertation subvert, question, and challenge through discourses of motherhood, social justice, and failure.

¹⁰⁶ Rottenberg.

¹⁰⁷ Rottenberg, 130.

¹⁰⁸ Rottenberg, 27.

While Rottenberg coined the term “neoliberal feminism,” scholars before her have noted the essentiality of considering the intersections of postfeminism and neoliberalism. Rottenberg’s text seems to focus on discourses of preparing for future motherhood. Conversely, Thornton discusses the prevalence of neoliberalism in discourses of present motherhood. Theorizing what she calls “Mommy Econonmicus” (a play off of Foucault’s “Homo Econonmicus”), Thornton observes how seemingly objective scientific research about neuroplasticity post-motherhood reifies neoliberal subjectivities of entrepreneurialism and self-optimization.¹⁰⁹ Motherhood, according to Thornton’s object of analysis, gives women a “competitive edge” in the workplace, given its focus on multitasking and risk-taking.¹¹⁰ This is a phenomenon that RawBeautyKristi (chapter 2) explicitly subverts, as she uses negative affect to challenge the seemingly natural, positive benefits of motherhood.

Methodology

In this project, I employ critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA). First proposed by Andre Brock, CTDA “integrates an analysis of the technological artifact and user discourse, framed by cultural theory, to unpack semiotic and material connections between form, function, belief, and meaning of information and communication technologies (ICT).¹¹¹” CTDA considers technological influences on individual user discourse. However, it also centralizes differences in media—for example, CTDA analysis must highlight differences between Instagram and Snapchat stories. CTDA analyzes technological artifacts as discourses and applies the same critical theory to the ICT and its users’ discourses. Some common sites of scholarly inquiry

¹⁰⁹ Davi Thornton, “Transformations of the Ideal Mother: The Story of Mommy Econonmicus and Her Amazing Brain,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 37 (2014): 276.

¹¹⁰ Thornton, 273.

¹¹¹ Andre Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 1012.

employing CTDA are racialized and gendered media. CTDA sees user discourse and technological discourse as mutually constitutive, each reflecting the other's influence. Importantly, CTDA rejects a deficit model that positions marginalized users as victims of a digital divide. Instead, this methodological approach considers distinct ways that those who are Othered use technology to highlight community norms and practices. Going beyond analysis of platform affordances and Technologies, CTDA examines "culture-as-technology and culture-of technology."¹¹² This approach allows for a holistic examination of technology. Indeed, many stakeholders (users, developers, creators) redefine and contextualize the purposes and conventions of different platforms.

The critical objects of analysis to which I apply CTDA are neoliberalism and postfeminism. Neoliberal and postfeminist discourses are baked into YouTube's platform vernacular. Discourse analysis of YouTube's platform includes consideration of YouTube's content creator policies, user discussion about YouTube's algorithm, and the interface of the platform. In chapter one of my dissertation, I consider how content creator discourse in the beauty community reflects the hegemonic ideologies of YouTube. Moving into my case studies, I demonstrate how user discourse reflects subversion of postfeminist, neoliberal logics.

The through-line of CTDA is the critical theoretical application. Depending on which discourses are studied, the strategy of application differs. When studying the discourses of YouTube's platform, I take a platform studies approach. In implementing these methodologies, I account for discursive practices among beauty YouTubers that reflect and challenge platform affordances, constraints, and conventions.

¹¹² Andre Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Subcultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 8.

My analysis accounts for the structures and technological affordances of YouTube and (to some degree) Patreon. This approach is particularly pertinent in two sections of my dissertation: chapter 1 and chapter 3. My methodology allows me to consider how YouTube's institutional policies and practices condition and discipline media workers. This extends to the ways in which YouTubers perform their selves online. In turn, I also consider how YouTubers navigate these conditions and respond to the technological structuring of the site. I accomplish this through comparing individual YouTuber identity performance with YouTube's affordances, community guidelines, and "advertiser friendly" policies.

As posited by Burgess, platform studies:

is an umbrella term for holistic approaches to those entities that are understood and represent themselves as digital media platforms. Platform studies concern the technologies, interfaces, and affordances, ownership structures, business models, media- and self representations, and governance of these entities, positioning these elements in a coevolutionary relationship with the platform's diverse cultures of use."¹¹³

It considers computational tools such as algorithms, tracking changes and evolutions that mark platform cultures. As platformization has dominated digital spaces, it is integral to consider how these systems function and inform identity performance online. While in broad strokes, social media entertainment maintains some universal conventions, each platform differs in discursive style and cultural codes. These platform-specific logics are paramount to new media research, as visibility strategies among content creators differ between platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Patreon. In other words, platforms govern influencer behavior.

A Brief History of YouTube's Beauty Community

While the beauty industry has been influential and profitable for centuries, YouTube's beauty community revolutionized consumers' perceptions of and relationships to cosmetics. Put

¹¹³ Jean Burgess, "Platform Studies," in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, eds. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 26.

broadly, the beauty community on YouTube is a space where makeup aficionados can come together to get tips, learn about products, and share experiences with cosmetics. It features niche video genres such as “get ready with me” (GRWM), “monthly favorites,” and morning/evening routines.

Generally, the history of the beauty genre has been broken down into three distinct “waves.”¹¹⁴ The first wave (2006-2009) is the advent of the beauty genre, whose origins are attributed to Adrienne Nelson and Michelle Phan. Adrienne Nelson published a video titled “Makeup Lessons - LOOK HOT in 5 Minutes or Less...” It is usually cited as the first makeup video posted on YouTube and features Nelson doing a neutral makeup look on a model. There is no dialogue or voiceover; instead, there is background music and text-based tips on the screen. This video marks the start of a “tutorial era,” in which beauty gurus walk viewers through makeup application for desired looks, offering technique tips along the way.

Nelson did not continue her beauty channel, but other “first wavers” such as NickieTutorials, Lauren Luke, and Marlana Stell created regular content on YouTube.¹¹⁵ From 2006 to 2009, the genre was overwhelmingly instructional. Demand for this content was high, as audiences sought out to copy the looks of celebrities. YouTuber SmokeyGlow notes that the rise of the socialite promoted interest in how to master certain looks viewers otherwise would not have access to. As such, these tutorial videos garnered millions of views. Importantly, this era also marks a rise in popularity of the platform, but was not oversaturated to the point of multiple beauty gurus producing identical content.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Smokey Glow, “The Rise and Fall of the Beauty Community,” YouTube, December 29, 2021, video, 33:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWV6hG2j7g8>.

¹¹⁵ Amanda Krause, “Inside the YouTube Beauty Community That’s Turning Makeup Artists into Millionaires,” *Insider*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/youtube-beauty-everything-you-need-to-know-jeffree-james-nikkietutorials-2020-3>.

¹¹⁶ SmokeyGlow, “The Rise and Fall of the Beauty Community.”

In contrast to today's digital beauty scene, the instructional nature of the first wave superseded personality. Early beauty videos lacked chatter, narrative, and interaction with viewers—instead, they were direct, simple, and often under ten minutes. Beauty gurus rarely talked about their personal lives online, and when they did, it was in direct relation to cosmetics. Unlike the pervasive self-branding of the modern-day entrepreneur, beauty gurus seemed most interested in disseminating instructional content. They did not articulate an affinity with certain brands, with the exception of those who were employed by specific cosmetics companies.¹¹⁷ While viewers seemed to appreciate the direct nature of these videos, this content had a certain “shelf life.” Once the beauty community gained more public visibility, tutorials for popular looks became oversaturated online. Brands also started to infiltrate the beauty community, thus transitioning into the second wave of the genre.

The second wave of the beauty community (2009-2018) is marked by hauls and product reviews. Hauls show off products that creators purchased, ranging from clothing to skincare. Product reviews feature discussion of pros and cons about new releases. Creators like Zoella, Bethany Mota, and Ingrid Nilsen entered the scene, whose channels conveyed a girlish *joie de vivre*.¹¹⁸ The commodification of the beauty community initiated two changes: self-branding and brand affiliation. Self-branding involved centering personality online: videos increased in length, as content creators regularly shared personal stories and coined catch phrases. The “chit chat get ready with me” video was a staple in the community, thus reinforcing the “best friend” image online. Conventional video introductions emerged in this wave: YouTubers would begin their videos in the same ways to invoke a sense of familiarity and kinship with viewers. This

¹¹⁷ Amelia Tait, “From How-Tos to Hauls: 10 Years of Beauty YouTube,” *Paper*, December 26, 2019, <https://www.papermag.com/decade-in-beauty-youtube-2010s-2641944952.html>.

¹¹⁸ Krause.

discursive self-branding marked the cultivation of parasocial relationships with audiences,¹¹⁹ thus informing the intimacy pact of the beauty community.¹²⁰ Authenticity, a central tenet to contemporary content creation, also became a conventional expectation in the beauty community. Conventions of authenticity, however, were complicated by the increasing commercialization of the beauty space. YouTuber brand affiliation emerged, as corporations used influencer marketing as primary advertising strategies. As the most popular beauty gurus accrued sponsorships and affiliate codes, others followed suit.¹²¹ Initially, this move towards brand advertising did not damage viewer trust, but as the practice became more common, it initiated changes in platform policy. Most notably, content creators had to include disclaimers about sponsorships and commissions, though even currently, this policy remains unenforced and often violated.¹²²

Overt brand affiliations informed increasing distrust among viewers. Suspicion arose as to whether beauty gurus were giving their honest opinions about products, or if they were simply praising companies for their own financial gain.¹²³ This practice is colloquially referred to as “shilling.” Promoting other companies was so popular in the beauty community, as it became a more reliable source of income than AdSense money; additionally, beauty gurus were not yet launching their own products. Despite claiming to only promote products they genuinely loved, beauty gurus became increasingly distanced from their viewers as they accrued visual cues of wealth. Unlike mainstream celebrities, whose conspicuous consumption practices are praised,

¹¹⁹ SmokeyGlow.

¹²⁰ Berryman and Kavka.

¹²¹ SmokeyGlow.

¹²² Jeremy Shtern and Stephanie Hill, “The Political Economy of Sponsored Content and Social Media Entertainment Production,” in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, eds. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 256.

¹²³ SmokeyGlow.

beauty gurus' ornate displays of wealth marked an era of unrelatability. Since this period, beauty gurus have had to negotiate the balance of economic growth with performance of authenticity.

Beauty guru product launches did occur in the second wave of the beauty community, as evidenced by Marlena Stell's Makeup Geek, Jaclyn Hill's Jaclyn Hill Cosmetics, and Jeffree Star's Jeffree Star Cosmetics. Yet this practice was not a convention into the community until the past five years or so. Product launches are expensive and time consuming; typically, this was only afforded to top-tier beauty gurus. However, merchandise and product lines are more commonplace in the contemporary YouTube beauty landscape.

The third wave (2018-present), which marks the current era of beauty online, has prompted questions about "the death of the beauty community."¹²⁴ This wave involves increased viewer distrust, makeup fatigue and anti-hauls.¹²⁵ This distrust, in part, comes from continuous scandals from the key players in the beauty community. Popular beauty gurus Jeffree Star and Laura Lee were implicated for racist tweets and James Charles was accused of sexually harassing minors. As noted by popular beauty commentary channel SmokeyGlow, drama in the beauty community went from "fun" and lighthearted, to "literal crimes."¹²⁶ After what has been colloquially referred to as "Dramageddon 1 and 2," popularity among commentary and drama channels has increased, while views on beauty videos have systematically decreased.

Anti-hauls have garnered increased attention in the past few years. The antithesis to the "haul" described above, anti-hauls tell viewers what not to buy. This evolution is informed by two phenomena: 1) after a promotion of over-consumption in the 2010s, viewers in the beauty community feel overwhelmed and fatigued by their cosmetics collections and 2) there has been a

¹²⁴ SmokeyGlow.

¹²⁵ Rachel Wood, "'What I'm Not Gonna Buy': Algorithmic Culture Jamming and Anti-Consumer Politics on YouTube," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 9 (2021): 2754-2722.

¹²⁶ SmokeyGlow.

mainstream focus on environmentalism—as such, the fashion and beauty industries have received negative attention.¹²⁷ An interesting hybrid genre that has emerged in the wake of the anti-haul is the “face full of makeup that I hate,” which mixes tutorials with “get ready with me” and anti-haul formats.¹²⁸

Despite the material impacts the third wave has had on cosmetics companies (BH Cosmetics, for instance, just filed for bankruptcy and Marlena Stell permanently closed Makeup Geek), YouTube’s beauty community maintains a loyal following. The pervasive “cancel culture” on YouTube appears not to be long-lasting—it is still common for top-tier beauty gurus to receive millions of views. The beauty community appears to be in a time of reckoning post-scandal: beauty gurus use lifestyle content to suggest self-transformation to their audiences. Authenticity and confessional culture are paramount in this third wave of YouTube, often encapsulated in lifestyle vlogs.

Two contemporary, third wave performances of authenticity in the beauty community are seemingly at odds with one another, yet highlight nuances of gender and sexuality in this space. On the one hand, for gay men on YouTube, performing camp (a conscious, dramatic aesthetic) and luxury is one tactic to demonstrate being true to oneself. Camp “subverts traditional rules and roles, pointing out the superficiality of everyday life and, in particular, sex roles.”¹²⁹ Performing luxury is often deemed inauthentic for women on YouTube, yet gay men embodying this position highlight the transgressive nature of performing what has historically been relegated to the feminine.¹³⁰ On the other hand, for cisgender, heterosexual women in the beauty

¹²⁷ Wood.

¹²⁸ Krause.

¹²⁹ Ellie Homant and Katherine Sender, “Queer Immaterial Labor in Beauty Videos By LGBTQ-Identified YouTubers,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 5393.

¹³⁰ Shirley Xue Chen and Akane Kanai, “Authenticity, Uniqueness and Talent: Gay Male Beauty Influencers in Post-Queer, Postfeminist Instagram Beauty Culture,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 1 (2021): 97-116.

community, a genre-specific claim to authenticity is the “anxiety vlog,” in which beauty gurus expose their experiences with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. This genre is a form of what Sophie Bishop calls “authenticity labour,” and can be an effective tool against accusations that a beauty guru has sold out in the wake of her popularity.¹³¹

As seen above, authenticity performances have been undergirded by a confessional culture that highlights self-disclosure.¹³² Negative self-disclosure, in digital spaces, invites feelings of intimacy between the content creator and producer, as it suggests that viewers are given access to a “backstage self” that was previously relegated to the private sphere. This confessional style has also been more prevalent due to the aforementioned move towards “lifestreaming” that features mundane, everyday elements of beauty gurus’ lives. As noted by Torjeson, “without the confessional function, most videos would merely consist of objective descriptions or formal guides and instructions, with none of the personality and intimacy which have emerged as a paradigm of the beauty and lifestyle sphere on YouTube.”¹³³ This confessional style can unveil serious health concerns, or it can be used in a lighthearted, humorous way. Whatever the context of this confessional style, however, its primary purpose is to position the YouTuber as trustworthy.

¹³¹ Sophie Bishop, “#YouTuber Anxiety: Anxiety as Emotional Labour and Masquerade in Beauty Vlogs,” in *Youth Mediations and Affective Relations*, Eds. Susan Driver and Natalie Coulter (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 89-105.

¹³² Berryman and Kavka, 86.

¹³³ Aleksander Torjesen, “The Genre Repertoires of Norwegian Beauty and Lifestyle Influencers on YouTube,” *Nordicom Review* 42, no. 2 (2021): 176.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter One: Conventions of the Contemporary Beauty Genre

In order to demonstrate how women in the beauty community disrupt and challenge neoliberal, postfeminist norms on the platform, I first lay a foundation of what those norms are. My introduction demonstrates that this is a dynamic, fast-evolving community that necessitates scholarly attention to changes in the digital beauty space. What were ubiquitous community norms five years ago may be out of vogue (or out of touch) currently. Chapter one of my dissertation, then, works to build off of scholarly observations about YouTube's beauty community and offers an updated genre analysis of this space.

I conduct this genre analysis through examination of four beauty gurus' discursive acts. The beauty gurus are as follows: Tati Westbrook (8.63 million subscribers), KathleenLights (4.51 million subscribers), Jamie Paige (479,000 subscribers), and Allana Davison (766,000 subscribers). I selected these beauty gurus due to their frequent appearances on beauty guru recommendation sites. While there are considerable numbers of popular men beauty gurus, the focus of this analysis is women on YouTube. I consider how their topic selection, vocabulary, self-presentation, and utilization of platform affordances reflect community norms.

I have divided the four case studies into two tiers: top-tier (1+ million subscribers) and mid-tier (400,000-999,000 subscribers). Top-tier beauty gurus are generally those who have paved the path for future beauty gurus and are the taste-makers of the genre. As such, it is important to consider how these influencers establish industrial conventions. However, I balance this analysis with mid-tier beauty gurus, as top-tier influencers have access to resources and risk-taking capabilities that their less popular counterparts might not. Furthermore, in order to increase visibility online, less popular beauty gurus may be more likely to adhere to algorithmic

demands. Thus, I bring two mid-tier beauty gurus into my analysis as representative of a “standard” beauty guru.

I section chapter one into “mini” case studies that explore the discursive acts of each beauty guru. To maintain a comprehensive yet contemporary focus, I analyze each YouTuber’s videos from March 2021-March 2022. Additionally, I consider how each influencer utilizes platform affordances. In this section, I introduce each influencer and discuss her relationship to YouTube’s beauty community.

- ❖ Tati Westbrook: Tati Westbrook is a 40 year old American YouTuber who began her channel in 2011. Sitting at 8.62 million subscribers, she is known as one of the biggest beauty gurus in the industry. She had her own cosmetics company called Tati Beauty, but that company has since shut down in the past year.¹³⁴ Following a public scandal with colleague James Charles about Charles’s alleged predatory behavior towards minors, Westbrook has returned her channel to a cosmetics focus. Now her channel regularly features product reviews, “get ready with me,” and decluttering videos, among others.
- ❖ KathleenLights: “KathleenLights” (whose real name is Kathleen Fuentes) is a 30 year old Cuban-American YouTuber who began her channel in 2013. While she has fewer subscribers than Westbrook (4.15 million), she is still a regular household name in the online beauty community. She has an active nail polish company called Lights Lacquer and a clothing brand called Lights Label.¹³⁵ Her channel features videos such as unboxings, try-on hauls, and product reviews.

¹³⁴ Krause.

¹³⁵ Phillips.

- ❖ **Jamie Paige:** Jamie Paige is a 27 year old Canadian YouTuber who began her channel in 2013. Sitting squarely at mid-tier with 479,000 subscribers, Paige is not a staple of the beauty community, but is popular nonetheless. She does not have a beauty or fashion brand; instead, she has a sticker shop called “Jamie Paige Doodles.” Her channel features reviews, routines, and vlogs.
- ❖ **Allana Davison:** Allana Davison is a 28 year old Canadian YouTuber who began her channel in 2013. She is slightly more quantitatively popular than Paige, with 766,000 subscribers. She does not have her own line or brand. Instead, she focuses her efforts on her Instagram page and YouTube channel. Her channel features vlogs, “get ready with me,” and reviews.

Chapter Two: Subversive Motherhood: Sociality, Affect, and Temporal Framings in the Vlogs of RawBeautyKristi

Performing negative affect is notably a central tenet of YouTube vlogs, especially for women on the platform.¹³⁶ Simultaneously—and paradoxically—aims of happiness, resilience, and the “good life” are central to neoliberal womanhood.¹³⁷ Particularly in mainstream media discourses of motherhood, women are framed as natural, fulfilled mothers. Van Cleaf discusses the resistive performance of motherhood through blogging, using a framework she coins the “digital maternal gaze,” which positions depictions of motherhood as unique forms of pleasure; it is collective and counter to hegemonic, neoliberal frameworks.¹³⁸ Previous work on counterhegemonic motherhood depictions center written “mommy blogs” and Instagram pages; my chapter centers

¹³⁶ Berryman and Kavka, 89.

¹³⁷ Rottenberg.

¹³⁸ Van Cleaf.

a YouTube channel (RawBeautyKristi) who works at the intersections of motherhood and beauty guru. Specifically, I use this case study to examine how digital performances of motherhood engage negative affect through crying, breakdown vlogs, and “raw” discussions of mental health to resist neoliberal norms of the white, Western mother. Much like other content creators in my dissertation, RawBeautyKristi engages ambivalence. In some ways, she reinforces economies of visibility on YouTube; in others, she engages a feminist politic in resisting limiting depictions of motherhood.

RawBeautyKristi provides a compelling case study for several reasons: 1) she utilizes “breakdown vlogs” to document motherhood in ways that challenge hegemonic frameworks of “new momism,”¹³⁹ she exemplifies a theoretical expansion of the digital maternal gaze, as she articulates the pain and unique forms of labor in motherhood in addition to the pleasure, 3) she negotiates the physical transformations of motherhood while articulating her appearance-based brand. In the contemporary attention economy, breakdown vlogs are a means of gaining visibility among white, middle-class women. By performing this genre online, RawBeautyKristi adds dimension to a role that predominantly foregrounds happiness and fulfillment. Expanding on the digital maternal gaze, RawBeautyKristi demonstrates collective solidarity-building through stories of struggle, rather than solely focusing on pleasure. This chapter works in conversation with Van Cleaf’s argument that depictions of motherhood under the digital maternal gaze embrace physical changes and document pleasure outside of the male gaze. RawBeautyKristi’s positionality at the intersections of motherhood discourse and beauty work complicates this theory and highlights its potential limitations.

¹³⁹ Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined all Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004.)

Taking RawBeautyKristi's videos from March 2021-March 2022, I pull themes of affective responses to motherhood. I consider how RawBeautyKristi builds community through her discourses of struggle and how doing so engages a feminist politic. In resisting dominant discourses of motherhood, RawBeautyKristi also reinforces other postfeminist, neoliberal norms. The YouTube beauty community is a commercial enterprise on a commercial platform; in legitimating her expertise as a beauty guru, RawBeautyKristi engages product promotion and self-brands as an active prosumer in the beauty space. At the same time, her vlog style videos highlight challenging aspects of motherhood. I highlight how RawBeautyKristi invokes resistive discourses of motherhood in her beauty-specific videos, and how she is influenced by her positionality as a beauty guru in her vlog style videos.

Chapter 3: Nappyheadedjojoba and Platform Intimacy

In this chapter, I explore how YouTuber "Nappyheadedjojoba" performs *platform-specific-intimacy* with her audiences on YouTube and Patreon. Nappyheadedjojoba utilizes beauty community vocabulary as a bridge to political action, thus highlighting the political potential of beauty YouTube audiences. Through this performance of identification, Nappyheadedjojoba uses language that is recognizable to her white audiences to invite action for Black support. Through this hybrid performance of beauty guru and political activist, Nappyheadedjojoba works to bridge the gap between a seemingly apolitical, postfeminist space, and political action. She cultivates intimacy with her white audiences by referencing their experiences and eliminating perceived distance. She cultivates this consubstantiality by employing identificatory rhetorics in topics of race and class, ultimately urging her viewers to engage politically.

This dissertation chapter considers differences in Nappyheadedjojoba's performance of intimacy on her Patreon. Patreon is a platform through which users can pay influencers for

exclusive access to content. Nappyheadedjojoba frames her Patreon as an “unfiltered” space where she can speak freely without concern about algorithmic suppression. Particularly pertinent was Nappyheadedjojoba’s observation that she reserves crying to her Patreon. Thus, this chapter focuses on how Nappyheadejojoba engages—or distances herself from—whiteness to cultivate intimacy with her patrons. I also consider how Nappyheadejojoba incorporates performance of beauty guru into her Patreon-exclusive content and how that configures into audience intimacy.

Throughout this comparison between Nappyheadejojoba’s intimacy performance on YouTube and Patreon, I consider how she engages emotional labor. Doing so diverges from scholarship that is occupation-specific and instead emphasizes how racial identity informs expectations of and responses to emotional labor. This concept draws out disparities in perceptions of Black upset: oftentimes, Black women are deemed “hysterical” or “angry” for expressing negative affect. As such, a survival strategy is invoking stoicism to evade viewer accusation.¹⁴⁰

Chapter 4: Performing Failure Online: Jenna Marbles and YouTube’s Attention Economy

In this chapter, I consider Jenna Mourey—also known as Jenna Marbles—as a case study of failure. Part of her self-branding from 2017 onwards was her desire—and subsequent failure—to be part of YouTube’s beauty community. Coining the term “beautuber,” Mourey performs failure as a form of meta-critique against YouTube’s fleeting attention economy that upholds hegemonic norms of youth, aesthetic labor, and feminine intimacy. Despite Mourey’s departure from YouTube, her long-term success still offers insights into how influencers’ performances of failure can extend their shelf lives online. In this chapter, I examine how Mourey unveils and

¹⁴⁰ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Let’s Talk About the Pressure of ‘Poise,’” YouTube, December 7, 2019, video, 20:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLETeTQbFNc&t=22s>.

challenges key components of contemporary notions of the digital attention economy: searchability/visibility and aspirationality.

Mourey's case study exemplifies feminine failure as "queering" normative identity performance. While Mourey does not embrace a queer label, she demonstrates how women's failure functions as refusal to engage hegemonic norms. As observed by Halberstam, "from the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures."¹⁴¹ By failing to measure up to the norms of the beauty community, Mourey employs pleasure through satirical play.

A few key themes emerge in this chapter. The first is postfeminism's relationship to age. Generally, postfeminism foregrounds a "confidence culture" in which women chase youth under the guise of authentic self expression.¹⁴² This analysis works in conversation with previous literature on Mourey's gendered performance of "hotness."¹⁴³ In her early 20s, Mourey satirically performed hegemonic femininity to criticize its oppressive influence on women. Engaging a similar criticism ten years later, Mourey must change her strategy to consciously flout norms of femininity. Her failure to embody youthful femininity, then, is curated, rather than externally imposed by her viewers.

Failing to be a "beautuber," then, Mourey invokes aspirationality as her desire to reach the unattainable, rather than calling her viewers to aspire to reach her level of success. Generally, contemporary influencers perform what Findlay calls "aspirational realness," which frames them

¹⁴¹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

¹⁴² Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, 127.

¹⁴³ Emma Maguire, "Self-Branding, Hotness, and Girlhood in the Video Blogs of Jenna Marbles," *Biography (Honolulu)* 38, no. 1 (2015): 72-86.

as authentic and empowered by commercial consumption.¹⁴⁴ Mourey fails to uphold the aspirational part of this concept—instead, she aspires to look like beauty gurus, but falling short. This subversion of aspirationality functions as further critique of the narrow norms of beauty—and success—that YouTube reinforces.

My conclusion considers beauty YouTube’s relationship to TikTok. In the wake of the now infamous “lash gate,” beauty YouTube has a site to critique social media inequities without drawing immediate attention to itself. While partly affirming capitalist norms of marketplace competition, this case study also presents the future of transgressive and political possibility online. Here, I also consider the limitations of transgressions on beauty YouTube, and how those limitations obscure exigent labor inequities.

¹⁴⁴ Rosie Findlay, “‘Trust Us, We’re You’: Aspirational Realness in the Digital Communication of Contemporary Fashion and Beauty Brands,” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 12, no. 4 (2019): 553-569.

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Chapter One: Contemporary Conventions of YouTube's Beauty Community

The beauty community on YouTube is a notable site of inquiry for several reasons.

Quantitatively, it is an immensely popular part of YouTube that attracts high traffic on the site and heavy consumption of cosmetics. The beauty community “has become YouTube’s most competitive industry,” is “the world’s leading online beauty consumption platform,” and has a daily view count of “more than a million, 10 times more than those of 2013.”¹⁴⁵ Its material consequences manifest in audience consumption of cosmetics, as beauty gurus are aspiring tastemakers and opinion leaders who promote products to trusting subscribers.¹⁴⁶ Given social media’s measurement of popularity through the attention economy, this high volume of users on beauty YouTube invites scholarly attention. Industrially, this community is one of tremendous social and financial capital. In addition to its impressive metrics, YouTube’s beauty community presents some cultural paradoxes that complicate notions of femininity, empowerment, and entrepreneurship. Unlike other sects of YouTube, the beauty community is woman-dominant, with popular figures like Jeffree Star, James Charles, and Manny MUA being exceptions to the rule. This phenomenon gives women content creators a space to profit from labor that has historically been relegated to the domestic sphere. Monetizing women’s work is a form of cultural legitimation, using the language of economics to demonstrate its utility in the public sphere.¹⁴⁷ At the same time, however, women’s profitability in the beauty community—and

¹⁴⁵ Aditi Bhatia, “Interdiscursive Performance in Digital Professions: The Case of YouTube Tutorials,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 124 (2018): 106.

Jiyoung Chae, “YouTube Makeup Tutorials Reinforce Postfeminist Beliefs Through Social Comparison,” *Media Psychology* 24, no. 2 (2021): 167.

¹⁴⁶ Florencia Garcia-Rapp, “‘Come Join and Let’s BOND’: Authenticity and Legitimacy Building on YouTube’s Beauty Community,” *Journal of Media Practice* 18, no. 2-3 (2017): 125.
Bhatia.

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas-Brie Guarriello, “Never Give Up, Never Surrender: Game Live Streaming, Neoliberal Work, and Personalized Media Economies,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 8 (2019): 1750-1769.

social media content creation writ large—comes from reinforcement of traditional notions of femininity.¹⁴⁸ Thus, the beauty community presents a site of complexity and ambivalence, particularly as its opportunity for further formalization and monetization increases. Additionally, as the beauty community evolves at a rapid pace, it is important to revisit its genre conventions frequently. As is common in algorithmically-informed social media platforms, what was popular even five years ago could be easily obscured in the current moment.

The "beauty video" is a recognizable genre on YouTube with both static and dynamic conventions and styles. Much like the Hollywood Western or romance novel, viewers recognize the semantic and syntactic conventions of beauty YouTube. In order to locate generic subversion in following chapters, I must first provide the genre's norms. Some of these conventions were established in the first wave of beauty YouTube and remain to this day, while others have evolved as YouTube's industrial, political, and social conditions change. In addition to providing the groundwork to later understand how the following case studies' acts are, in fact, subversive, this chapter can also illuminate what is culturally valued for North American women.

Using genre analysis, I argue that contemporary conventions of the beauty community center on the notion of renewed authenticity as a response to the overt commodification of the community and resulting viewer distrust. Specifically, current beauty influencers engage nostalgia for the early hobbyist days of the genre, present themselves as a more authentic alternative to beauty TikTok, emphasize natural, "no makeup-makeup" looks, and film decluttering and anti-haul videos. I first provide some context on how genre analysis functions in literary and film/television studies traditions. Following my methodology, I review previous literature on the norms and conventions of beauty influencing on social media. Finally, I focus

¹⁴⁸ Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, "'Having it All' on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1-11.

on the evolved conventions (2021-2022) of YouTube's beauty community. Focusing on the most current (at the point of writing) discursive and aesthetic conventions of beauty YouTube lays the foundation for understanding how subversion of generic norms functions within YouTube's attention economy.

Methodology

In this chapter, I conduct a genre analysis across 4 channels from March 2021-March 2022. Genre studies analyzes "recognizable communicative event[s] characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the...community in which it regularly occurs."¹⁴⁹ This methodology accounts for rhetorical moves employed by speakers and authors that position its content and form as culturally recognizable. Importantly, genres are social, as they solidify and evolve through community discourse—relatedly, generic conventions are followed in order to maintain social cohesion.¹⁵⁰ As noted by Miller, the Internet has complicated genre studies, particularly in accounting for "how to reconcile stability and change."¹⁵¹ In examining digital platforms, genre analysis must fold in considerations of medium and materiality. Specifically, it is important to consider the constraints that influencers face in their respective genres, as well as the working conditions that they navigate. Interestingly, digital genre analysis works in conversation with CTDA (a methodology I will employ in following chapters), given its acknowledgment of platform difference.

My use of genre analysis crosses disciplinary boundaries between literary studies and film/television criticism. While the textual components (discourse, aesthetics) do illuminate the

¹⁴⁹ Lili Zhan, "Understanding Genre in Use," *Concentric: Studies in Linguistics* 38, no. 2 (2012): 214.

¹⁵⁰ Lili Zhan.

¹⁵¹ Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014)," *Letras & Letras* 31, no. 3 (2015): 60.

semantic elements of the beauty video as genre, cultural studies' approaches to genre can identify the syntactic and pragmatic elements of the beauty video. As noted by Altman, the semantics of a genre include recognizable language, plot, character tropes, and setting that signify a film's association with a western (cowboys) or a musical (synchronized song and dance). The syntactics of a film include broader themes and cultural values that the semantic elements represent (for example, rugged individualism in the US). There is an interplay between semantic and syntactic elements of media—for instance, the repeated trope of the monster in science fiction signifies different syntactics, depending on the historical context of the film or show.¹⁵² Altman's semantic/syntactic approach to genre incorporates both the thematic significance of a genre, as well as its broad applicability to an array of media texts. Similarly, Altman's revision to generic analysis considers pragmatics of a genre—the use factor of a genre for audiences and industries.¹⁵³ In this chapter, I consider all three proposed generic elements of YouTube's beauty community. Particular semantic elements that I consider are forms of audience address, subjects of videos (GRWM, monthly favorites), and references to and use of cosmetics. Syntactic elements that I focus on are themes that are informed by neoliberalism and postfeminism—namely the commodified self and notions of women's empowerment. The pragmatic elements of the beauty video focus on two stakeholder audiences: the audience (how women are disciplined and constituted by watching YouTube beauty videos) and advertisers (how predictable and consistent genre performances help standardize influencer-brand partnerships).¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Society for Cinema & Media Studies* 23, no. 3 (1984): 6-18.

¹⁵³ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

¹⁵⁴ Emily Hund, *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

Mittell posits that a cultural studies approach to genre accounts for relationships outside of the text. Indeed, the cultural significance of certain genres do not come from the text itself; rather, they are prescribed by audiences and industries.¹⁵⁵ The industry's role in genre-creation and recognition is particularly important on YouTube, given the power of advertisers on the platform's multisided market.¹⁵⁶ Genres are a powerful tool for categorizing consumer demographics. Indeed, assigning cultural meaning to the beauty video can provide a direct pipeline from content consumption online to product consumption in stores. As brands pick up on the effectiveness of influencer marketing, the standardization of beauty YouTube's discursive and aesthetic conventions means that influencer-brand partnerships will be less of a liability for the brand. In other words, the solidification of the beauty genre on YouTube is not just a means for audiences to easily sort through relevant content, nor does it end at assigning YouTubers categorical identities—it has material, economic consequences for advertisers.

While potentially empirically narrow, this genre analysis follows Schatz's argument about filmmaking that the works of individual creators "are determined by the conventions and expectations involved in the genre filmmaking process."¹⁵⁷ Of course, each individual content creator has some stylistic differences—particularly due to the demand for influencers to be "authentic"—but studying individual works can also suggest something about a larger body of values. In other words, the work of the individual auteur illuminates industrial perceptions of what audiences would watch. These perceptions of audience watchability fall somewhere in between ritual and ideological theories of genre: rather than suggest that mediated genres simply satisfy independent audience demands, or that audiences are mere dupes to an industry's

¹⁵⁵ Jason Mittell, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 3 (2001): 3.

¹⁵⁶ David Evans and Richard Schmalensee, *Matchmakers: The New Economics of Multisided Platforms* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2016).

¹⁵⁷ Schatz, 13.

dominant ideologies, we might consider genre's socializing influence, while also recognizing audiences' agency in accepting, rejecting, or negotiating the dominant messages of the media text.¹⁵⁸ One intervention that my dissertation makes is that this same logic extends to beauty gurus themselves. Following cultural studies' theorists claims of audience agency, I bring attention to the playful opposition to YouTube's dominant ideologies content creators can perform, all while seemingly adhering to the capitalist, patriarchal logics of the platform.

I examine four beauty gurus in this chapter: Tati Westbrook (8.63 million subscribers), KathleenLights (4.51 million subscribers), Jamie Paige (479,000 subscribers), and Allana Davison (766,000 subscribers). Tati Westbrook is an American YouTuber who began her channel in 2011. She is 40 years old. Sitting at 8.62 million subscribers, she is known as one of the biggest beauty gurus in the industry. She had her own cosmetics company called Tati Beauty, but that company has since shut down in the past year.¹⁵⁹ She is also the CEO of a vitamin and supplement brand called Halo Beauty. Following a public scandal with colleague James Charles, Westbrook has returned her channel to a cosmetics focus. Now her channel regularly features product reviews, "get ready with me," and decluttering videos, among others. "KathleenLights" (whose real name is Kathleen Fuentes) is a Cuban-American YouTuber who began her channel in 2013. She is 30 years old. While she has fewer subscribers than Westbrook (4.15 million), she is still a regular household name in the online beauty community. She has an active nail polish company called Lights Lacquer and a clothing brand called Lights Label.¹⁶⁰ Her channel features videos such as unboxings, try-on hauls, and product reviews. Jamie Paige is a Canadian

¹⁵⁸ Altman.

¹⁵⁹ Amanda Krause, "Inside the YouTube Beauty Community That's Turning Makeup Artists into Millionaires," *Insider*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/youtube-beauty-everything-you-need-to-know-jeffree-james-nikkietutorials-2020-3>.

¹⁶⁰ Hedy Phillips, "Kathleen Lights," *Euphoria*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.euphoriazine.com/blog/2020/08/beauty-kathleen-lights/>.

Youtuber who began her channel in 2013. She is 27 years old. Sitting squarely at mid-tier with 479,000 subscribers, Paige is not a staple of the beauty community, but is popular nonetheless. She does not have a beauty or fashion brand; instead, she has a sticker shop called “Jamie Paige Doodles.” Her channel features reviews, routines, and vlogs. Allana Davison is a Canadian Youtuber who began her channel in 2013. She is 28 years old. She is slightly more quantitatively popular than Paige, with 766,000 subscribers. She does not have her own line or brand. Instead, she focuses her efforts on her Instagram page and YouTube channel. Her channel features vlogs, “get ready with me,” and reviews.

I selected these beauty gurus due to their frequent appearances on beauty guru recommendation sites. While there are considerable numbers of popular male beauty gurus, the focus of this analysis is women on YouTube. I consider how their topic selection, vocabulary, self-presentation, and utilization of platform affordances reflect community norms.

I have divided the four case studies into two tiers: top-tier (1+ million subscribers) and mid-tier (400,000-999,000 subscribers). Top-tier beauty gurus are generally those who have paved the path for future beauty gurus and are the tastemakers of the genre. As such, it is important to consider how these influencers establish industrial conventions. However, I balance this analysis with mid-tier beauty gurus, as top-tier influencers have access to resources and risk-taking capabilities that their less popular counterparts might not. Furthermore, in order to increase visibility online, less popular beauty gurus may be more likely to adhere to algorithmic demands. Thus, I bring two mid-tier beauty gurus into my analysis as representative of a “standard” beauty guru.

Beauty Communities of Practice

Extant literature on the beauty community has framed the space as a “community of practice,” defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”¹⁶¹ Thus, the beauty space on YouTube is both a genre with recognizable stylistic functions and also a community with regular interactions among members. Gannon and Prothero observe that the digital beauty community aligns with key characteristics of communities of practice: mutual engagement comes from social interaction through direct messages, comments on posts, video collaborations, and offline meetups. Members of the beauty community engage in shared repertoire by using and recognizing genre-specific vocabulary (i.e. “hauls,” “empties,” “GRWM”) and tagging their videos accordingly. They will use recognizable tools and products in the community, thus alluding to a larger “conversation” that occurs beyond their individual videos. For instance, there is an implicit assumption that beauty gurus will try and share their thoughts on popular tools such as the Dyson Airwrap or viral products like Tarte’s Shape Tape Concealer. Lastly, beauty gurus perform joint enterprise by actively negotiating the conventions of the beauty community and holding each other accountable for those agreed-upon conventions, thus evidencing the beauty community as a form of indigenous enterprise.¹⁶² This last facet of communities of practice is complicated by the fact that YouTube is both a “top down” platform—in which its advertiser-based algorithm largely determines what gets seen and what gets obscured—and a “bottom up” platform, in which amateur content creators can produce

¹⁶¹ Étienne Wenger et al, *A Guide to Managing Knowledge: Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2002), 4.

¹⁶² Valerie Gannon and Andrea Prothero, “Beauty Bloggers and YouTubers as a Community of Practice,” *Journal of Marketing Management* 34, no. 7-8 (2018): 611.

content and share their seemingly authentic selves simply by having access to the Internet.¹⁶³

Establishing the beauty sphere online as a community of practice helps us understand that part of beauty gurus' identity performance comes from an understanding that they are part of something bigger. Their videos are not just instructional tutorials for viewers to follow—indeed, they are part of a community that supports, collaborates, and sometimes competes. Flouting conventions of beauty YouTube then, is not merely a genre mistake, it misrepresents a body of influencers.

Authenticity Online

Despite the fast-evolving nature of YouTube's beauty community, there are some fundamental requirements to doing beauty YouTube well. I will first cover requisite elements of *all* social media influencing, and will then introduce beauty YouTube-specific demands. The first quality is appropriately toeing the line between commerciality and authenticity.¹⁶⁴ The impetus to be authentic is a vital demand for social media content creation as a whole. Since microcelebrities gain fame by performing amateur ordinariness, performing an unrecognizable self after gaining economic leverage over their fans would be a severe oversight for influencers.¹⁶⁵ Even if behaving differently might be a more accurate depiction of who influencers are off-camera after they achieve high economic status, social media users read consistency as authenticity.¹⁶⁶ One method of communicating authenticity among beauty and lifestyle influencers is by performing a middle-class sensibility—instead of performing their social class, beauty gurus curate images of middle classness that are recognizable to their

¹⁶³ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 64.

¹⁶⁴ Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "Being 'Really Real' on YouTube: Authenticity, Community and Brand Culture in Social Media Entertainment, *Media International Australia* 164, no. 1 (2017): 71-81.

¹⁶⁵ Theresa Senft, *CamGirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2008.)

¹⁶⁶ Marwick, 120.

viewers.¹⁶⁷ Of course, this claim to authenticity is in direct competition with popular beauty videos on YouTube: excessive clothing hauls, luxurious home and closet tours, and obscene makeup collections (oftentimes in a designated “beauty room”).¹⁶⁸ Wealthy influencers mitigate this discrepancy by using culturally legible stories to frame their success. Jeffree Star, for instance, uses a “rags-to-riches” framework to share his trajectory towards becoming a billionaire.¹⁶⁹ Michelle Phan, one of the original creators in the beauty community, uses a “Cinderella story” to maintain authentic imagery in her self-brand.¹⁷⁰ These stories, while ultimately showing that these influencers are more financially successful than many of their viewers, support claims to authenticity by giving viewers the impression that they have access to their favorite creators’ “backstage selves.” Thus, the financial success is read as genuine and well-earned.

Central to digital performance of authenticity is the claim that influencers are just like their viewers. At the same time, they must be attractive to advertiser interests, many of whom sell values of aspirationality. Facing this contradiction, social media microcelebrities “present themselves as having faced, and vanquished, the same or analogous life traumas that their audience encounters.”¹⁷¹ This kind of performance shows that influencers struggle with the same insecurities and hardships as their viewers. In other words, their expertise does not come from academic or professional credentials in a certain industry; instead, and paradoxically, their expertise comes from their amateur status. Having, at least at face value, similar lived

¹⁶⁷ Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017), 134.

¹⁶⁸ Tiffany Ferg, “Obnoxious Closets of the Super Rich|Internet Analysis,” *YouTube*, uploaded 18 February, 2021, video, 27:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFsuarWlhFE>.

¹⁶⁹ Anna Barritt, “Microcelebrity, Class, and Participatory Entitlement,” in *Makeup in the World of Beauty Vlogging*, edited by Clare Douglass-Little (London, The Rowan & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2020), 65-84.

¹⁷⁰ Cunningham and Craig, *Being ‘Really Real,’* 77.

¹⁷¹ Stephanie Baker and Chris Rojek, *Lifestyle Gurus: Constructing Authority and Influence Online* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020), 35.

experiences as their viewers, influencers accrue social capital in the form of trust when they promote programs, products, and services that helped them surmount obstacles. Influencers share their vulnerabilities with their viewers, and in turn, get financially rewarded. An important dynamic to note here is that the influencers' success stories are commodified and shoppable. Hund and McGuigan argue that social media logics incorporate a "shoppable life," in which users must be able to purchase the aspirational lives that influencers share. However, this commercial intent is obscured by stories of genuine struggle and vulnerability.¹⁷² Using authenticity narratives to sell both products and a self-brand is particularly important in the beauty community, given its overtly commercial nature. Makeup can seem inherently inauthentic, as it is a form of masking and performance. Thus, it behooves beauty gurus to craft narratives about makeup as a playful form of self-discovery and creative expression.

Maintaining a through-line of vulnerable identity performance, influencers use self-disclosure to further support claims to authenticity. One such mode of self-disclosure may be through negative affect: an expressly gendered form of affective labor, women influencers tend to gain visibility through "breakdown vlogs," i.e. crying on camera.¹⁷³ Furthermore, influencers (especially in the beauty and lifestyle spheres) reveal intimate details of their private lives, thus disrupting the public/private divide.¹⁷⁴ This personal self-disclosure contributes to a sense of intimacy and trust between influencers and their fans, which is integral to an attention economy that necessitates continued audience engagement.

¹⁷² Emily Hund and Lee McGuigan, "A Shoppable Life: Performance, Selfhood, and Influence in the Social Media Storefront," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 12, no. 1 (2019): 18-35.

¹⁷³ Rachel Berryman et al, "Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, Self-Exposure and the Productivity of Negative Affect," *Convergence* 24, no. 1 (2018): 95.

¹⁷⁴ Baker and Rojek, 190.

Beauty community-specific appeals to authenticity use visuals in purposeful ways. For instance the “no makeup video” or starting videos with a bare face are visual indicators of authenticity and vulnerability.¹⁷⁵ This strategic documentation of influencers’ bare faces suggests that they are fully open with their viewers and have nothing to hide. At times, beauty gurus will film entire videos with no makeup to remind their viewers about values such as self love and acceptance, and to suggest that while we can use makeup as expressive play, we should not rely on it to feel good about ourselves. Beauty gurus also use cosmetics to show their viewers how easy makeup application can be, and how accessible beauty work is to anyone with a makeup brush. Thus, these moves represent qualities of vulnerability and accessibility to loyal viewers. As I will demonstrate in my chapter’s analysis, claims to authenticity are heightened in this era of beauty YouTube, given TikTok’s surge in popularity. Since TikTok is a platform that centers authenticity, beauty YouTubers must position themselves as not just authentic, but *more* authentic than their TikTok counterparts. Thus, I lay a foundation for how authenticity is performed and recognized online.

Intimacy Online

Intimacy is one of the most appealing draws towards social media for both users and creators. Indeed, in suggesting that social media content is more authentic than its mainstream counterparts, the two-sided relationship is an essential part of that argument. Since YouTube’s affordances privilege intimacy through the like and comment function, it is important that influencers demonstrate commitment to relationships with their viewers and convey accessibility by liking and responding to comments and fulfilling viewer video requests. This is in keeping

¹⁷⁵ Loes van Driel and Delia Dumitrica, “Selling Brands While Staying ‘Authentic’: The Professionalization of Instagram Influencers,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research Into New Media Technologies* 27(1) 2020: 69.

with other social media platforms' intimacy affordances, since they generally invite closeness through "the spatial (evoking closeness), the temporal (evoking immediacy), the social (produced by patterns of direct address and self-revelation) and the medial (evinced by small-screen techniques such as cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing rhythms, etc.)"¹⁷⁶ Due to these platform affordances, users have come to expect direct communication with the creators they follow. One quantified indicator of "selling out" among microcelebrities is the level at which they do not "like" or respond to viewer comments.

The beauty community's gendered nature makes feminized cues of intimacy paramount. As noted by Mardon et al, entrepreneurship in digital beauty work is not an isolated endeavor that is informed by heroic, masculine notions of the self-made man—instead, it is founded on notions of "tribal entrepreneurship" that privilege discourses of loyalty, gratitude, and friendship.¹⁷⁷ Much like the "rags-to-riches" stories in claims to authenticity, women on YouTube legitimize their popularity through discourses of gratitude—in other words, they justify their success by telling their subscribers that they could not do it without them.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, in the beauty community, common gratitude tropes include signing off with an obligatory "love you guys," and arguing that their community (i.e. their subscribers) is the best one on YouTube. Similarly, the modes of address that women influencers use establish a conversational tone. This direct address and casual language mirrors conversation between friends, thus framing the influencer as a sister or friend figure.¹⁷⁹ This intimacy practice invites viewers to feel that they

¹⁷⁶ Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, "'I Guess They See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend': The Role of Intimacy in the Celebrification of Beauty Vloggers," *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 310.

¹⁷⁷ Rebecca Mardon et al, "YouTube Beauty Gurus and the Emotional Labour of Tribal Entrepreneurship," *Journal of Business Research* 92 (2018): 443-454.

¹⁷⁸ Helena Heizmann and Helena Liu, "'Bloody Wonder Woman!': Identity Performances of Elite Women Entrepreneurs on Instagram," *Human Relations* 75, no. 3 (2022): 425.

¹⁷⁹ Aleksander Torjesen, "The Genre Repertoires of Norwegian Beauty and Lifestyle Influencers on YouTube," *Nordicom Review* 42, no. 2 (2021): 175.

are part of something, that their creator of choice is a leader in a passion-based community, and obscures unequal power dynamics in the creator-subscriber relationship.

As I argue in chapter three, platform-specific performances of intimacy urge viewers to take action (whether that action be purchasing something, subscribing to a creator's Patreon, or participating in social protest). Without intimacy, the evolved elements of YouTube's beauty genre would not be effective. The ostensibly close-knit relationship between content creator and viewer must be established so that self-branding exercises seem authentic, rather than just another practice in soulless capitalism. Indeed, one of the appeals of beauty YouTube for viewers is that the shared bonding over a new products overshadows the economic capital that beauty YouTubers gain from featuring a product on their videos.

The Commodified Self

Each of these strategies contributes to the influencer's self-brand. As YouTubers communicate their identities to their followers, they are not just building community of like-minded individuals; they are creating a commodified, enterprising self. The impetus to brand oneself is not unique to the beauty community, or even YouTube. As stated by Marwick, "the idea of turning yourself into a brand is now presented as an essential Web 2.0 strategy, and is firmly instilled in modern business culture."¹⁸⁰ As digital work transitions into an era of formalized social media entertainment, the self-brand becomes especially important. As creators become increasingly commodified and formalized, they must establish recognizable (and consistent) self-brands across social media platforms.

In an oversaturated market, content creators must brand themselves in ways that promote engagement. Hence, they must perform visibility labor, defined as "the work individuals do

¹⁸⁰ Marwick, 164.

when they self-posture and curate their self presentations so as to be noticeable and positively prominent among prospective employers, clients, the press, or followers and fans” in order to be recommended and subsequently seen online.¹⁸¹ Despite the fact that the beauty community has a seemingly endless supply of creators, it has an advantage in containing vernacular that is attractive to advertisers, thus increasing its visibility. As such, beauty gurus strategically employ what Bishop calls “vlogging parlance”: here, beauty gurus incorporate advertiser-friendly terms into their content. Through closed-captioning technologies, algorithms pick up on this keyword use, and is more likely to widely share such content.¹⁸² Again, recognizing the gendered nature of beauty vlogs, many women beauty gurus brand themselves in ways that are aligned with postfeminist conceptualizations of empowerment, femininity, and agency.¹⁸³

One of those postfeminist norms incorporates performance of affect, which I hold in conversation with Raymond Williams’s structures of feeling. This theoretical contribution accounts for affective, lived experiences that are less formalized than ideologies. Not yet a formalized ideology, structures of feeling invoke a feeling that an emergent ideology is on the horizon. Branded structures of feeling shed to light brands’ recent association with moral good. A dynamic and social enterprise, branded structures of feeling invoke consumers’ affective consciousness: loyalty to a brand is deeply felt and is indicative of an economic turn towards neoliberalism. Indeed, it is this ongoing relationship with the consumer that gives the branded structure of feeling meaning.¹⁸⁴ Updating Williams’s theory for the social media sphere, branding the self through affective labor is part of the “sentimentalization of the public sphere,”

¹⁸¹ Crystal Abidin, “Visibility Labour: Engaging with Influencers’ Fashion Brands and #OOTD Advertorial Campaigns on Instagram,” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 161, no. 1 (2016): 90.

¹⁸² Sophie Bishop, “Vlogging Parlance: Strategic Talking in Beauty Vlogs,” in *Microcelebrity Around the Globe: Approaches to Cultures of Internet Fame*, edited by Crystal Abidin and Megan Brown (Emerald Publishing Ltd, 2019), 21-32.

¹⁸³ Erin Duffy and Hund, 8.

¹⁸⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1977), 128.

or, more broadly put, “emotional capitalism.”¹⁸⁵ Here, emotions are commodified and culturally legible narratives of psychological growth are sold.

To appeal to both advertisers and viewers, beauty gurus brand themselves as citizen consumers. In other words, they communicate their identities and values through purchases. In turn, YouTube influencers provide an aspirational model of successful citizenship. As their values are communicated through brand loyalty, those same values can seemingly be bought through a link in the description box. To advertisers, the value of this exercise is apparent. To viewers, branding oneself through a shoppable life is still seen as a noble enterprise, given consumption’s association with “larger symbols of individualism, freedom, and equality.”¹⁸⁶

Specific to the beauty guru’s self brand is performing informational expert. This quality works in conversation with the intimate, authentic, and commodified elements of the visible YouTuber. While mastery is a less noticeable demand among lifestyle content, there remains an expectation that beauty YouTubers will have some degree of expertise—whether that be through practice, self-study, or professional background. This informational expertise works in conversation with authenticity, creating a cohesive brand of trustworthiness: viewers can feel confident that their favorite beauty gurus are not leading them astray.¹⁸⁷ Thus, the successful beauty guru is not only a big sister and friend, she is also a teacher and a coach.¹⁸⁸

If the beauty guru gains trust by performing the “amateur expert,” why does she have so many loyal followers? In other words, how do influencers with little to no degrees or accreditations become the voices of reason in the cosmetics sphere? Much like the lifestyle influencer (whose genre is becoming increasingly melded with the beauty community), the

¹⁸⁵ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007).

¹⁸⁶ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 23.

¹⁸⁷ Douglass-Little, 19.

¹⁸⁸ Torjesen, 179.

“amateur expert” can hold so much cultural weight due to its alignment with an enlightenment period ethos of skepticism towards authority and individualism.¹⁸⁹ In a digital media landscape, that challenge towards authority comes in the form of DIY and “do what you love” discourse. Indeed, the beauty guru becomes a refreshing antidote to out-of-touch celebrities and over-funded cosmetics companies. Working in conversation with enlightenment ideals, lifestyle influencers are so pervasive today in part due to overwhelming economic uncertainty. In an economic climate that is increasingly marked by precarity, gig work, and financial crisis, the lifestyle influencer’s performance of stability, security, and most importantly, *upward mobility* serves as a prescription against insecurity.¹⁹⁰ In other words, if an average, everyday woman can get out of her economic rut, there is hope that with enough hard work, self-determination, and relentless positivity, so can other women in precarious circumstances.

The beauty community’s popularity speaks to a larger cultural phenomenon of women digital entrepreneurs. The beauty space on YouTube affords opportunities for women to capitalize on labor that has been made invisible to the public eye.¹⁹¹ In line with first and second wave feminist commitments, women are celebrated and posited as agentic, empowered subjects for commodifying their seemingly natural strengths. In fact, the beauty community serves as a site of challenging traditional notions of the male entrepreneur. In some respects, then, beauty work can be disruptive. At the same time, feminist scholars note that we must see this ostensibly progressive move with a critical eye. Women may be able to capitalize off of previously un(der)compensated work online, but doing so necessitates adherence to idealized neoliberal

¹⁸⁹ Baker and Rojek, 44.

¹⁹⁰ Baker and Rojek, 70.

¹⁹¹ Alex Bevan, “How to Make Victory Rolls: Gender, Memory, and the Counterarchive in YouTube Pinup Hair Tutorials,” *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 5 (2017): 755-773.

norms of the entrepreneurial subject.¹⁹² In particular, “an effective neoliberal subject attends to fashions, is focused on self-improvement, and purchases goods and services to achieve ‘self-realization.’ He or she is comfortable integrating market logics into many aspects of life, including education, parenting, and relationships.”¹⁹³ For women, these market logics manifest in the body through discourses of self-improvement and transformation.¹⁹⁴ As such, successful beauty vloggers reinforce dominant social hierarchies and perform hegemonic femininity.¹⁹⁵

Authenticity, intimacy, and the commodified self are still integral qualities of the successful (i.e. visible) beauty YouTuber. These are established syntactic elements of beauty YouTube, as they reflect the industrial demands of the YouTube microcelebrity. However, the evolved semantic elements of beauty YouTube in 2021-2022 play with the cultural significance of those three qualities. In what follows, I present my own genre analysis of the beauty community’s current cyclical conventions: performing nostalgia for both the early days of beauty YouTube and the 1990s, positioning beauty YouTube as more authentic than TikTok, featuring natural makeup looks, and filming decluttering/anti-haul videos.

Historical Through Lines in the Beauty Community

Despite the rapidly-evolving nature of the beauty community on YouTube, there are some similarities between eras. The first through-line is performance of affect, or affective intensity. Affective labor is commonplace among women YouTubers, particularly in light of neoliberalism’s psychological turn towards positive mindsets. Notably, all beauty gurus in this study frequently stated feeling excited for the video in their introductions. In addition to conveying authenticity—as doing so suggests that the creators only film videos they are

¹⁹² Heizmann and Liu.

¹⁹³ Marwick, 13.

¹⁹⁴ Elias et al.

¹⁹⁵ Heizmann and Liu, 423.

genuinely excited about—it contributes to a passionate, “do what you love” ethos of digital labor. Conversely, while the beauty guru’s origins come from upbeat positivity and a shared love of cosmetics, YouTube’s confessional culture invites affective labor through mental health discourse. Disclosure about mental health struggles is a common affective trope to convey authenticity—for instance, the “sit down, chatty” video about a beauty guru’s mental health problems serves as a means of disrupting a continuous flow of commercial, promotional content. As noted by Bishop, mental health vlogs—particularly those centered around anxiety and depression—are forms of authenticity labour on YouTube. Here, women vloggers engage neoliberal self-help norms by sharing their personal journeys with getting to the other side of mental struggles.¹⁹⁶

Claims to authenticity are also evident through performance of ordinariness in contemporary beauty videos. Beauty gurus will share mundane, everyday moments of their lives throughout their videos. Notably, having watched many of the select beauty gurus’ videos in chronological order, I found myself invested in the stories of Tati Westbrook’s uncut cold brew addiction, Jamie Paige’s curly hair journey, and Kathleen Light’s battle with unforgiving Florida heat. Much like the dedicated mental health video, these “lifestreaming” moments disrupt the overtly commercial nature of beauty videos. Introductions and conclusions are particularly popular times in beauty videos to “digress” and share mundane moments—importantly, these moments also feature calls for users to engage: for instance, when drinking a Starbucks coffee that her husband bought her, Tati Westbrook might ask her followers how they take their coffee.

¹⁹⁶ Sophie Bishop, “#YouTuber Anxiety: Anxiety as Emotional Labour and Masquerade in Beauty Vlogs,” in *Youth Mediations and Affective Relations*, Eds. Susan Driver and Natalie Coulter (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 89-105.

It is these small, everyday digressions that make viewers feel as though they are friends with beauty gurus, rather than amateurs seeking out instructional content.

At times, cultivation of intimacy is even more explicit than sharing everyday moments. Deliberate statements about how much their subscribers mean to them are commonplace in beauty videos. Across all beauty gurus in this study, influencers credited their followers for giving them video ideas, thus framing the video production process as collaborative. Furthermore, they often reference their subscribers as their family and repeatedly express their gratitude for their fans' continuous support. This dynamic is indicative of what Jenkins et al call *participatory culture*.¹⁹⁷ It is clear then, that in the midst of a rapidly changing platform, intimacy and authenticity are two foundational qualities that beauty gurus must convey to their audiences. Distinct modes of performance in the contemporary beauty space are invoking nostalgia for the early days of the beauty community, framing the YouTube beauty community as a more authentic alternative to TikTok, featuring natural makeup, and filming decluttering/anti-haul content. All of these new strategies fall under a larger performance of renewed authenticity in the wake of viewer distrust and increasing commercialization of the digital beauty sphere.

Invoking Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a feminist issue. It has been theorized as a distinctly feminine subject, particularly in relation to domesticity.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, it is a distinctly *mediated* feminist issue: in the wake of postmodernism, our attachment to and understanding of the past comes from circulation of imagery. Indeed, it is replicas of the real that symbolically stand in for the past.¹⁹⁹ These images

¹⁹⁷ Henry Jenkins et al, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Society* (New York, New York University Press, 2018).

¹⁹⁸ Madeleine Powell et al, "Constructions of Family Relationships in a COVID Christmas: An Analysis of Television Advertisements on YouTube," *Feminism and Psychology* 32, no. 3 (2022): 365.

¹⁹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1991).

are romanticized and imbued with a lens of presentism, thus implicating media as having a notable role in audiences' yearning for the past. Nostalgia for "early days" of women's domesticity (arguably in tandem with the cult of domesticity) is so popular on media, given its representation of an era "in which women had endless amounts of time."²⁰⁰ In other words, mediated depictions of unpaid domestic labor become repurposed as symbols of privileged leisure. YouTube is a key site for feminine nostalgia, then, as it can use romanticized images of the past to sell aspirational futures.

YouTube's incorporation of feminine nostalgia is aligned with its postfeminist ethos. Contemporary depictions of a nostalgic past layer postfeminist notions of women's choice, sexuality, and empowerment onto what Spigel calls a "postfeminist nostalgia for a prefeminist future."²⁰¹ Here, depictions of periods of early feminist movements reduce feminism to celebration of individual choice, aesthetic empowerment, and career-driven moves. Thus, nostalgia for feminism is understood through a postfeminist lens. While the beauty community's nostalgia does not reach as deeply into the past, it still centers longing for the days that women could do what made them happy, rather than compete for visibility online. Imbued in this nostalgic discourse is a postfeminist emphasis on happiness as the sole indicator of a woman's ability to thrive.

Social media is also a key site of nostalgia, as its metrics track and quantify the affective intensity of memories. Social media sites' affordances of "sharing memories" (i.e. Facebook memories, Timehop) suggest that nostalgia is built into the architecture of digital platforms. Culturally, YouTube as a platform invokes nostalgia through videos like "YouTube Rewind."

²⁰⁰ Elizabeth Nathanson, "As Easy as Pie: Cooking Shows, Domestic Efficiency, and Postfeminist Temporality," *Television and New Media* 10, no. 4 (2009): 311.

²⁰¹ Lynn Spigel, "Postfeminist Nostalgia for a Prefeminist Future," *Screen* 54, no. 2 (2013): 271.

Interestingly, Jacobsen and Beer note that the affective intensity through which we feel memories is informed by how much engagement the corresponding post on social media received.²⁰² As such, the technological affordances of social media platforms extend to meaning-making in relation to our identities and life experiences. Given that beauty YouTube's engagement metrics have declined in the past 2-3 years²⁰³, it is logical to return to the height of the genre's popularity.

The early days of beauty YouTube were notably hobbyist. Before the advent of YouTube's partner program in 2007, creators could not make any money from the platform.²⁰⁴ As such, beauty YouTubers came onto the scene to share their passion for YouTube. While one might consider this early era of beauty YouTube the age of unbridled authenticity, Baudrillard notes that evidence of leisure time is often a status symbol.²⁰⁵ Because there was no money involved in this era, producing on the platform necessitated surplus income for technical equipment and cosmetics, as well as leisure time to film and edit videos. This marks the early stages of aspirational content—however, the lack of economic gain among early beauty gurus suggested that their motivations were more genuine and pure than their 2023 selves and colleagues. In response to the overt commercialization of the community, fans communicate feeling nostalgic for the early days of a more “authentic” beauty space.²⁰⁶ As such, current beauty gurus are more likely to lean into this nostalgic desire and reference early beauty YouTube—in some cases, they make entire videos dedicated to the subject.

²⁰² Benjamin Jacobsen and David Beer, “Quantified Nostalgia: Social Media, Metrics, and Memory,” *Social Media + Society* (2021): 4.

²⁰³ Ella Faust, “The Downfall of the Beauty Guru,” *Creators Network*, July 28, 2021, <https://creatorsnetwork.co/the-downfall-of-the-beauty-guru/>.

²⁰⁴ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

²⁰⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London, Sage, 1998).

²⁰⁶ Barritt, 75.

First, the beauty gurus in this study referenced their old, “cringey” content and products they used to love as a means of invoking nostalgia. A running theme in Westbrook’s content is references to her “Tip Tuesday” videos, in which she would walk her viewers through a different makeup tip. Typically, these references are comedic and frame Westbrook’s early content as so amateur it was bad. Not only does this allusion to Westbrook’s early series reinforce her authenticity, but it has two audience-driven functions: first, asking her viewers if they remember her Tip Tuesday videos establishes a sense of intimacy through loyalty. Second, it promotes continued engagement on the platform (which the algorithm rewards²⁰⁷), namely engagement on *her* platform. Implicit in this reference is that if viewers are not familiar with Tip Tuesday, they should be, and can go seek out that series via a curated playlist on her channel. In a similar vein, Westbrook references “cringey” products that were widely loved to establish a shared bond and sense of common footing between herself and her viewers. For example, when going through six foundations that she will never wear again, Westbrook introduces the Dream Matte Mousse: “ladies. Who is with me? Is this not a horrific foundation?”²⁰⁸ This phrasing suggests that the foundation is ubiquitous: everyone in the beauty community surely not only knows about it, but used it, which is a common regret that all beauty lovers can share.

Other beauty gurus in this case study are not quite so self-referential, but following Westbrook’s lead, they do associate products with beauty eras. In Fuentes’s recurring monthly series, “Boxycharm Unboxing,” she goes through and tries on all the products that she got from the month’s Boxycharm subscription box. In November of 2021, she received a Violet Voss product. She immediately notes, “[Violet Voss] is definitely one of those YouTube nostalgic

²⁰⁷ Bishop, *Anxiety Panic, and Self-Optimization*.

²⁰⁸ Tati Westbrook, “6 FOUNDATIONS...That I’ll Never Buy Again,” YouTube, December 20, 2021, video, 18:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8OOLCDYym4>.

brands.”²⁰⁹ Notably, this statement suggests the cultural dominance that beauty YouTube has had for over a decade. It also helps cement the idea that beauty YouTube is a recognizable genre because it has a history that viewers are aware of and they’ll understand referential jokes about it. Not only are certain brands associated with YouTube, but they are associated with certain phases of the platform. Their cultural recognition comes not from the brand’s marketing, but by the meaning digital content creators have made around them. The effects here are twofold: first, Fuentes legitimates the brand itself, which fulfills her responsibilities as a brand ambassador for Boxycharm. Second, using nostalgia to emphasize the cultural weight that beauty YouTube had legitimates the genre in a period of decline. While TikTok is not often mentioned throughout claims to nostalgia, it is a significant competitor to YouTube. Much like the early days of beauty YouTube, when a beauty TikToker recommends a product, it quickly gets sold out. This dynamic, in conjunction with the declining view numbers on YouTube beauty videos, creates uncertainty about beauty YouTube’s future. As such, beauty gurus on YouTube sell that which makes their platform unique: history. Indeed, in 2021, Fuentes made an entire video dedicated to nostalgic beauty YouTube products and listed each product that she used in the description.²¹⁰ This was one of Fuentes’s most-viewed videos in the data set, with 433,706 views. By invoking nostalgia for the past through present-day products, YouTubers create a shoppable life for the golden days of YouTube.

At times, curating nostalgia seems to be a shared enterprise among brands and influencers, which creates a mutually constitutive yearning for the past. One trend that brands have recently capitalized on is nostalgia for the ‘90s. Beauty gurus will then try out these

²⁰⁹ Kathleen Fuentes, “November Boxycharm Unboxing|2021 (Try On – First Impressions),” YouTube, November 16, 2021, video, 7:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fU7X31T6eI>.

²¹⁰ Kathleen Fuentes, “Trying Old YouTube Holy Grails: Are They Still Good?!,” YouTube, October 7, 2021, video, 23:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URgJ5EB3ke4>.

products while incorporating stories of their childhoods. Here, the target audience appears to be viewers in their late twenties and early thirties, given the explicit call for viewers to share similar stories from their childhoods. Sometimes, in the case of Jamie Paige, the nostalgic referencing is as simple as stating a lipstick color reminds her of the ‘90s.²¹¹ Other times, brands will release explicitly nostalgic collections or products. In 2021, Wet N Wild, a popular drugstore makeup brand, released a limited edition “Saved By the Bell” collection, which paid homage to the ‘90s American sitcom. Westbrook reviewed it quickly following the release date. Here, she not only invoked nostalgia for a TV show that was popular in her childhood, she invoked nostalgia for the experience of her childhood, expressly targeting older (according to the cosmetics industry) viewers: “do any of you remember? Those of us that are like the 30s plus category. Do you remember being on your cordless phone and sometimes it would zap into somebody else’s call? That happened to me so many times.”²¹² In addition to cultivating intimacy with her subscribers, this reference also suggests something about audience: as viewers in their teens and twenties flock to beauty TikTok, YouTube beauty gurus explicitly call out their older viewers who may stick to the platform. This is a common trope for Fuentes and Paige as well, who capitalize on nostalgic brand releases such as a Barbie Steam Pod hair tool²¹³ or a candle that smells like Fruit Loops.²¹⁴

There are two nostalgia periods, then, that beauty influencers invoke: the “golden age” of YouTube (somewhere around 2010-2014) and the ‘90s. Capitalizing on the latter strategy seems

²¹¹ Jamie Paige, “Full Face of CHARLOTTE TILURY: What’s Actually Worth its \$\$\$,” YouTube, March 26, 2021, video, 25:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItknIWfvLCw>.

²¹² Tati Westbrook, “SAVED BY THE BELL X Wet N Wild Collection,” YouTube, August 19, 2021, video, 18:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx66tERPmr4>.

²¹³ Kathleen Fuentes, “BARBIE HAIR?! UHH...Trying Out Barbie Steampod,” YouTube, February 2, 2022, video, 13:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El3DqCkRmVU>.

²¹⁴ Jamie Paige, “Some of My Current Lifestyle FAVORITES! (Vlog Style),” YouTube, May 14, 2021, video, 17:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8rIXzmqS0o>.

to come from invoking the childhoods of the creators and their viewers. Yet nostalgia for the '90s is more culturally significant than personal histories and is notably heralded as a desirable time period across media industries. The period of the '90s "is often constructed in the contemporary imagination as a peaceful fin de siècle, or an interregnum: in this case the period between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and 9/11....it signifies the point in history immediately before anxiety became the defining issue of the present era."²¹⁵ Much like the influencer's role in serving as an antidote to economic uncertainty, invoking a historical period of comparative stability offers audiences an escape from increased precarity and fragmentation. While some references to the '90s may explicitly speak to audiences who lived through the decade, it does not ostracize younger audiences—they too can find comfort in the images of a more secure past. At first glance, it may seem that romanticizing the '90s is counter to social media logics: why would we call attention to how much better a pre-Internet past (ostensibly) was for our social, cultural, and emotional health? Similar to postfeminist nostalgia for a prefeminist past, social media's romanticization of the '90s obscures the economic insecurity, slashed welfare programs, and culture of individual responsibility that were well under way. Additionally, it places a platformized lens onto the era: we romanticize the seeming simplicity of the 1990s while also foregrounding social media logics of authenticity, self-branding, and participatory culture.

In many ways, women's nostalgia for the '90s mirrors women's nostalgia for pre-feminist domesticity. While the '90s was a postfeminist era, this was a time in which identifying as a feminist was repudiated.²¹⁶ Postfeminism still upholds popular feminist logics of the "boss

²¹⁵ Neil Ewen, "'Talk to Each Other Like It's 1995: Mapping Nostalgia for the 1990s in Contemporary Media Culture,'" *Television & New Media* 21, no. 6 (2020): 576.

²¹⁶ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 12.

babe,” the confidence gap, and consumption-as-liberation—the major difference is that postfeminist discourse did not embrace the term “feminist.” As more and more radical feminists generate visibility and challenge the status quo online (on Patreon and TikTok, for example), YouTube’s power is threatened. As such, nostalgia for the ‘90s celebrates a time when women were not quite so subversive without breaking the social contract of celebrating women’s empowerment and individual choice. In other words, this nostalgia disciplines women using language that adheres to the cultural moment.

This framing of a pre-Internet past contextualizes one of Fuentes’s most emotional videos to date: “OMG!! A FRIENDS COLLECTION?!! *is this real life???????” Each season, Fuentes promotes Lights Lacquer’s new collection on YouTube. In October of 2021, Fuentes announced that she had teamed up with *F.R.I.E.N.D.S.* to create a titular limited edition collection. Of course, Fuentes must convey excitement when promoting every collection, but this one is distinctly affective: she tears up, she breathes heavily, and she shares stories from her childhood. She starts off the video with, “oh my god. I’m already gonna start crying. I told myself I wasn’t going to because I’ve been crying all month.”²¹⁷ This sets the viewer up to feel emotional alongside Fuentes and to feel the weight of just how meaningful the show is to her. This affective intensity works not just for consumers who grew up in the ‘90s and watched original airings of the show (though it certainly worked on me, and I immediately purchased two bottles from the restocked collection after watching this video), but it creates an attachment to a past that some viewers did not live through. Part of this affective attachment comes from seeing *F.R.I.E.N.D.S.* through Fuentes’s eyes, as she performs self-disclosure and authenticity labor. When discussing her inspiration for pursuing this collection, Fuentes states, “me and this show have a

²¹⁷ Kathleen Fuentes, “OMG!! A FRIENDS COLLECTION?!! *is this real life???????” YouTube, October 29, 2021, video, 17:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHhb0qUM5eU>.

connection...Friends was actually the show that got me through a really, really hard time in high school...Friends was the only thing that would make me laugh and get my mind off things.”²¹⁸ Importantly, Friends stopped airing in 2004, well before Fuentes would have been in high school. As such, Fuentes invokes nostalgia for two eras: the 1990s—the height of the show’s popularity—and ~2008-2011, when she would have been in high school (which also closely precedes the golden age of YouTube). In this statement, Fuentes conveys vulnerability and authenticity despite the explicitly promotional nature of this video. By showing the connection that she has to the show and threading nostalgia throughout her video, Fuentes makes an advertisement for her brand authentic. Even though she is not providing her viewers access to the show, she still offers them an avenue to purchase elements of her life. Wearing the shades “We Were On a Break” or “How You Doin’?” invites viewers to feel closer to Fuentes, as they can be insiders to a pivotal moment in her life.

A More Authentic Alternative to TikTok

In response to the declining numbers on beauty YouTube, a question pervades the platform: is the beauty community dead? In fact, two subjects in later chapters of this dissertation have posed variations of this question, with RawBeautyKristi asking what happened with the downfall of the beauty community²¹⁹ and Nappyheadedjojoba noting that all of the beauty gurus seemingly quit the platform.²²⁰ While some of this phenomenon is due to the rise of the lifestyle influencer, it also stems in part from the genre’s migration to TikTok. Originally created as the platform Musical.ly, the Chinese-owned company ByteDance created Doyuin and its sister platform,

²¹⁸ Kathleen Fuentes, “OMG!! A FRIENDS COLLECTION?!!”

²¹⁹ RawBeautyKristi, “The Downfall of The YouTube Beauty Community...What Happened?,” YouTube, May 20, 2022, video, 36:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGyilNfvy7w&t=1227s>.

²²⁰ Nappyheadedjojoba, “All the Makeup ‘Gurus’ Quit Doing YouTube and I think I know Why...|Ti Talks,” YouTube, June 16, 2022, video, 14:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHxILB3cpQM>.

TikTok in 2018.²²¹ It jumped in popularity in spring of 2020, likely due in part to the COVID-19 Pandemic.²²² Beauty influencing does so well on TikTok, due to its algorithmically-driven “For You” page. Because viewers scroll through content that is recommended to them, rather than solely who they follow, beauty content is more likely to reach a wide range of users.²²³ Additionally, “52% of users now say they discover new products on TikTok.”²²⁴ As such, it is an attractive platform for advertisers, given its wide reach and verifiable influence. The increasing popularity of TikTok, then, is a threat to beauty YouTube, and beauty gurus on the platform must change their strategies in order to maintain relevance and visibility online.

A popular video on beauty YouTube is recreation of TikTok beauty tutorials. Interestingly, both Davison and Paige shared videos of themselves recreating the famous 2021 Madison Beer (an American singer with 18.2 million TikTok followers) makeup tutorial. Somewhat ironically, the original video was posted on YouTube by Vogue, but became viral on TikTok. Both Davison and Paige have established themselves as knowledgeable, talented beauty gurus. Yet in relation to beauty TikTok, they frame themselves as less wealthy, less talented, and less aspirational. In other words, by presenting themselves as amateurs, they reclaim authenticity.

Paige’s relational claim to authenticity is largely economic. Looking at the thumbnail of her video, we immediately see that she conveys relatability by acknowledging the unattainable financial demands of Beer’s makeup look. By essentially offering a “hack” for Beer’s tutorial that saves upwards of \$300, Paige presents herself as in touch with middle class concerns.

²²¹ Joe Tidy and Sophia Smith Galer, “TikTok: The Story of a Social Media Giant,” *BBC News*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53640724>.

²²² Laura Karin, “TikTok is Changing the Way We Buy Beauty,” *Elle*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.elle.com/uk/beauty/a36034169/tiktok-changing-the-way-we-buy-beauty/>.

²²³ Liz Flora, “Why the Beauty YouTuber Collab has Struggled to Translate to Tiktok,” *Glossy*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.glossy.co/beauty/why-the-beauty-youtuber-collab-model-has-struggled-to-translate-to-tiktok/>.

²²⁴ Karin.



Figure 1

Paige also discursively frames herself as more relatable than Beer. One strategy that she employs is referencing Beer's aspirational beauty. Early on in the video, Paige states that she's "not surprised the video went viral," given how naturally beautiful Beer is. She states that the makeup Beer uses does not matter because either way she looks stunning.²²⁵ She also questions the truthfulness of Beer's claims when she gets to the mascara stage of the tutorial: "she does say that [the mascara] gives her lashes the look of lash extensions. I'm 98% sure that she's just wearing lash extensions here. If she's not, she's just blessed with very long lashes."²²⁶ While this video was published almost two years before the now famous TikTok "lash gate," in which influencer Mikayla Nogueira promoted a mascara while surreptitiously wearing false lashes, it is indicative of a larger culture of distrust around TikTok influencers. Despite the public scandal and false information that has circulated around beauty YouTube, framing YouTube beauty gurus as suspicious of TikTok beauty influencers creates an illusion of renewed authenticity.

Similarly, Davison presents herself as less elegant and naturally beautiful than Beer.

Throughout the video, she expresses awe at her features and suggests that she would go to great

²²⁵ Jamie Paige, "I DUPED the Viral Madison Beer Makeup Tutorial (Same Look for Way Less!)," YouTube, March 30, 2021, video, 23:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNpQ7IxnSY0>.

²²⁶ Jamie Paige, "I DUPED the Viral Madison Beer Makeup Tutorial."

lengths to look like her. When doing her contour, Davison states, “if this practice can give me her jawline and chiseled cheekbones, I’m all for it, people.”²²⁷ Despite Davison’s own natural beauty, her contrast to Beer gives her the appearance of an everyday, ordinary person. Her authenticity is heightened in comparison to an influencer who is so out of reach. Her relational authenticity is what makes her trustworthy to viewers. She continues, stating, “she said, ‘thanks for watching my tutorial’ and flicked her hair to the side. I don’t know if that has the same effect on me.”²²⁸ This statement creates an impression of a bumbling viewer who struggles to achieve feminine grace.

It is worth noting that in chapter 4 of this dissertation, I will discuss performance of failure as a form of resistance against hegemonic demands of femininity performance. While Paige and Davison borrow similar strategies of failure, their performance is not resistive. Ultimately, Paige and Davison uphold western standards of beauty. They do not disrupt or play with aesthetic norms of womanhood; they simply discursively convey authenticity while aesthetically performing femininity. Both their attempts are glowy and aspirational. In other words, their femininity is intact. Drawing attention to their faux pas is a claim to authenticity, which is not a disruption to the industrial logics of YouTube. In this case, YouTube’s ethos of democratization is threatened by a platform whose amateur content creation, authenticity, and visibility usurps the former. Invoking the work of Gillespie, YouTube frames itself as an apolitical purveyor of the everyday person’s creativity. Seemingly politically neutral, YouTube limit[s] its liability for the users’ activity.”²²⁹ In other words, YouTube’s public message is that it has no political agenda, nor does it pick favorites (creators, advertisers, social causes). Yet

²²⁷ Allana Davison, “Testing THAT Madison Beer Makeup Tutorial...” YouTube, March 15, 2021, video, 21:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tg-XHf1HVpQ&t=1s>.

²²⁸ Allana Davison, “Testing THAT Madison Beer Makeup Tutorial...”

²²⁹ Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 356.

YouTube's competition with TikTok illuminates the fact that platforms are, indeed, highly political. In fact, at the time of writing this dissertation, TikTok is under threat of being banned. American messaging about TikTok's supposed security risks invokes fear of the Other. Simultaneously, the political agendas of American platforms are naturalized.

Testing TikTok makeup hacks is also popular, particularly among mid-tier channels like Paige and Davison's. A makeup hack is a trick or tool that is supposed to make cosmetic application simpler, quicker, or more beautiful. In general, YouTube beauty gurus convey suspicion and alarm about these hacks, resulting in a comedic video. There is a mix of acknowledgement that the YouTube beauty guru is not talented enough to achieve the look and amusement at the absurdity of the hack itself. For instance, Davison embeds in her video a TikTok hack where the subject applies contour all over their face and blends it out in such a way that their face looks chiseled and defined. Davison looks impressed yet is clearly unsure of how the hack will go for her. Ultimately, she decides that "putting a contour all around my mouth literally just looks like I smeared mud on my face."²³⁰ While there is some degree of admittance of failure, Davison's video also suggests that TikTok promotes false claims and inauthentic looks, while beauty YouTube is accessible and user-friendly. In other words, unveiling the curtain of TikTok's inauthenticity obscures the financial privilege and opulent lifestyles of beauty YouTubers. Promoting a \$50 foundation that works seems sensible in comparison to promoting an application technique that makes it look like you have mud on your face.

YouTube beauty gurus further their claims to relational authenticity by positioning themselves as subjects that are recognizable to viewers. All of the YouTubers in this case study mentioned buying a product or trying a look because they were inspired by beauty TikTok.

²³⁰ Allana Davison, "Testing Viral TikTok Makeup Hacks," YouTube, May 28, 2021, video, 18:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyHTSI3kKjs>.

Indeed, it seems that Mikayla Nogueira has taken the place of Jeffree Star and Jaclyn Hill and is recognized as the leading voice of the digital beauty community. Instead of clinging onto their old statuses as community leaders, beauty gurus take a different approach: they frame themselves as viewers and consumers who are following beauty trends alongside their subscribers. Their cultural power as aspiring tastemakers may have shifted, but this strategy upholds their image as a best friend. Fuentes, for instance, conveys exaggerated excitement when she talks about TikTok, noting, “it’s so funny; I used to be such a hater of TikTok. Now here we are...TikTok makes makeup even more exciting.”²³¹ This discursive admiration of TikTok suggests to viewers that they need not pick one platform over another; indeed, on YouTube, they can find an exciting conversation between the platforms. It also shows that Fuentes, much like her viewers, gets sucked into TikTok trends. This admiration of TikTok is a recurring theme on Fuentes’s channel. When she tries new products, there is a good chance that they are from TikTok. In her 2021 video, “This Product Blew Me Away...GRWM,” Fuentes applies all of her makeup on camera. When she gets to her eyeshadow stage, she states, “I’m gonna try on something that, of course, I bought because of TikTok. These are little powdery pigments. They’re from Kaima...I saw Mikayla talking about this. Her video went absolutely viral months ago. I have been dying to get my hands on these.”²³² The use of the first name Mikayla suggests that Nogueira is a household name and that Fuentes can fangirl with her viewers about this creator. At first glance, Fuentes’s celebration of TikTok may seem counterintuitive. However, her channel offers shared bonding over a TikTok celebrity. In other words, TikTok is the place to be in awe, YouTube is the place to relate.

²³¹ Kathleen Fuentes, “Testing Viral TikTok Makeup...and Wow!!!!,” YouTube, September 30, 2021, video, 17:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPU7tOj5vQU>.

²³² Kathleen Fuentes, “This Product Blew Me Away...GRWM,” YouTube, November 13, 2021, video, 11:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixKaTqOxHOW&t=5s>.

Relating to TikTok varies among top-tier and mid-tier beauty YouTubers. This may stem from the relative privilege that top-tier YouTubers hold. They are more likely to have a loyal subscriber-base and may be less threatened by the new platform. Conversely, mid-tier beauty YouTubers may have to make more claims to the superiority of YouTube, as their following is less established. While the nuances of these framings are distinct, both relationships with TikTok promote the same outcomes: visibility and engagement. By drawing on TikTok trends, YouTubers can incorporate the same tags and keywords that are in viral TikTok videos. They are in conversation with TikTok, thus positioning themselves in a sphere of virality. Thus, despite the increasingly dated nature of beauty YouTube, these gurus still find ways to place themselves at the center of the social media economy.

Because the generic conventions of YouTube and beauty TikTok are so similar, the stakes of distinction are raised. Simply looking textually, we might assume that beauty gurus on YouTube and TikTok might bind together as colleagues. Considering the industrial relationships between the two platforms, however, individual content creators are incentivized to pit the two communities against one another. Rather than see their TikTok counterparts as fellow precariats in an exploitative system, beauty YouTubers perform in ways that suggest they see beauty TikTokers as threats to their online visibility.

Natural Beauty

Perhaps the most notable similarity among the four case studies was references to natural beauty. Moving away from “full glam,” current beauty gurus favor low coverage face products, subtle, earth-toned eyeshadows, and feathery eyebrows. The “no makeup makeup” is a popular phrase in this era of beauty YouTube. While the natural beauty movement seems to work against the aims of the beauty community, Smith et al find that the rise of natural beauty actually encourages

more cosmetic consumption, in part because consumers want to emulate the same effortless appearance that they see on social media.²³³ The digital beauty community's seeming preference for natural beauty mirrors mainstream media's celebration of "real" women. Take, for instance, Dove's 2004 "Real Beauty" campaign that featured un-airbrushed women in their advertisements. Indeed, both social media and mainstream television tend to reject surgical intervention. Despite the ostensibly progressive politics of this "natural beauty" movement, it still falls in line with postfeminist ideology, given its continued emphasis on women's bodies as sites of empowerment.²³⁴ As we will see in our four case studies, beauty gurus' seeming embrace of natural beauty promotes capitalist logics of empowerment via consumption and the female body as a symbol of identity.

Interestingly, Westbrook uses rejection of surgical intervention to promote her brand Halo Beauty. Across her videos over the past two years, Westbrook discloses that she has stopped getting Botox and doing lip fillers. At the same time, she promotes Halo Beauty, specifically citing her natural beauty as a means of selling the anti-aging booster. Outside of her brand, she promotes anti-aging tools²³⁵ and skincare.²³⁶ Here, Westbrook makes a very careful distinction: natural beauty is not the same thing as no makeup. If feminine subjects are to reject surgical intervention, they must stay appropriately feminine by purchasing anti-aging products and updating cosmetic application according to aging concerns.

²³³ Rosanna Smith et al, "The Cost of Looking Natural: Why the No-Makeup Movement May Fail to Discourage Cosmetic Use," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 50 (2022): 324-337.

²³⁴ Christiana Tsaousi, "How to Organize Your Body 101: Postfeminism and the (Re)construction of the Female Body Through *How to Look Good Naked* 39, no. 2 (2015): 145-158.

²³⁵ Tati Westbrook, "EXTREME ANTI-AGING Beauty Tools & Secrets...", YouTube, October 14, 2021, video, 23:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Og9cO7NY_Y8.

²³⁶ Tati Westbrook, "SKINCARE OBSESSIONS... Worth the Hype!," YouTube, August 9, 2021, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZj5hwaGbCY>.

In line with Smith et al's observations is that natural looks necessitate consumption of more products specifically for "no makeup makeup" days. Both Davison and Paige identify products that they use for particular days that they want to look more natural. Paige, for instance, discusses the utility of cream products for natural makeup looks, as "they're so easy to work into the skin."²³⁷ This statement suggests that in order to achieve natural beauty, you must invest in different kinds of products. Not only that, but natural beauty varies according to seasons, whose climates also require different products. In a similar vein, Davison references products that she wears for "natural skin days,"²³⁸ which is a distinction she makes from "no makeup makeup" days. As such, viewers are called upon to purchase products for natural skin, as well as natural makeup. Beauty gurus, then, follow a transactional view of natural beauty: they appear aligned with the cultural movement, yet embrace and encourage consumption as a means of achieving natural beauty.

Otherwise called the "clean girl aesthetic," the natural beauty trend is a form of aspirational authenticity. YouTube beauty gurus seemingly support moves away from the makeover paradigm, yet it is deeply aligned with neoliberal femininity: women are called upon to invest in themselves by purchasing expensive skin care products. Importantly, the "clean girl aesthetic" was reappropriated from Black beauty culture, yet the most common representations of this trend are white and thin women.²³⁹

²³⁷ Jamie Paige, "The Makeup Look I'm Wearing the Most This Summer! *No-Makeup Makeup*," YouTube, July 16, 2021, video, 16:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1JLSFDDE3c>.

²³⁸ Allana Davison, "*Perfect Skin* Makeup Tutorial," YouTube, March 5, 2021, video, 21:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSPxkMoXQ70>.

²³⁹ Tiana Randall, "The Problem With TikTok's 'Clean Girl' Aesthetic," *I-D*, December 7, 2022, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/epzna7/tiktok-clean-girl-aesthetic>.

Decluttering and Anti-Hauls

Working in direct contrast to the “haul” video in which YouTubers share the items they purchased at a given store, the anti-haul tells viewers what they will not purchase and encourages them to do the same. As noted by Wood, the anti-haul is reflective of a cultural ethos of anti-consumerism. In the wake of environmental movements and consumption fatigue in the beauty community, the anti-haul serves as a redirect away from purchasing excessive amounts of makeup. Additionally, it is a tool for beauty gurus to reclaim authenticity, as they can use this genre to demonstrate that they have their viewers’ best interests (and wallets) in mind.²⁴⁰ This genre generates visibility on YouTube, as the affective intensity with which influencers speak about products promotes engagement. In keeping with the theme of authenticity, the anti-haul provides an opportunity for shared bonding between creator and viewer over subpar products.

A tension that beauty gurus must negotiate is the demand for positive affect and shared intensity over disdain for certain products. One way that Westbrook manages this tension is by calling attention to the shifts in the cosmetics industry, noting that she’s simply reacting to these changes. In her 2022 video, “ANTI HAUL – Yikes...Not Buying These Products!,” Westbrook states, “I’m just really unimpressed with what is happening. I don’t receive a ton of PR anymore. I’m good with that. But I’m also not really inspired to purchase a lot of the new products. I never was one to do anti-hauls, but honestly, there’s just not a lot going on.”²⁴¹ By showing that she doesn’t naturally harp on the negative (i.e. not being one to do anti hauls), Westbrook can participate in a visible genre while keeping her positive image intact. Westbrook’s anti-hauls also seem to be an indicator of renewed honesty. After her public scandal with James Charles,

²⁴⁰ Rachel Wood, “‘What I’m Not Gonna Buy’: Algorithmic Culture Jamming and Anti-Consumer Politics on YouTube,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 9 (2021): 2759.

²⁴¹ Tati Westbrook, “ANTI HAUL – Yikes...Not Buying These Products!,” YouTube, January 17, 2022, video, 17:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3Jwp9eLJEk&t=918s>.

Westbrook left the Internet for a year. Coming back, she explicitly states that she is taking a “laid back” approach to her videos, and that, moving forward, she wants to be brutally honest.²⁴² The anti-haul, then is a symbol of change on Westbrook’s channel.

Working in tandem with the anti-haul is Westbrook’s focus on anti-consumerism. A running theme in Westbrook’s later content is her sudden lack of interest in luxury or designer items. Westbrook incorporates her audience into this evolution, using a cultural shift in values to cultivate intimacy with her viewers:

What happened with the beauty community that it isn’t so popular as before? I actually think we all looked up a little bit. I personally think it has a lot to do with COVID. Kind of reprioritizing what matters. I don’t want to say don’t watch beauty videos, ‘cause like here I am, hey guys, let’s play with makeup, but I think the obsession kind of became a little dull. It wasn’t so like ‘I have to have the new collection....’ I think it’s a great thing...I’ve noticed that I have a better balance in the things I’m interested in hobby-wise. I still love makeup. It’s no longer my dominant identity.²⁴³

Much like anti-hauls, this observation about the beauty community’s shift in priorities is a claim to authenticity. It situates Westbrook as someone who does not just have commercial motivations. In addition to a reclamation of authenticity, Westbrook’s musings align with neoliberal feminism. Her focus on balance is key here, as it affirms idealized womanhood: she performs aesthetic labor and appropriate femininity, yet at the same time, she shows that she is not consumed by one facet of her life. This discourse of balance is particularly important for the modern beauty guru whose cosmetic play is also her job. Showing successful work-life balance is indicative of aspirational womanhood. Indeed, performing appropriate work-life balance suggests a more fulfilled and happier woman.²⁴⁴

²⁴² Tati Westbrook, “ANTI HAUL – Yikes...Not Buying These Products!.”

²⁴³ Tati Westbrook, “Super Personal...Q&A,” YouTube, January 10, 2022, video, 28:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeisL5pPBJM>.

²⁴⁴ Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.

Interestingly, another common trope in beauty videos is the “decluttering” video. Here, beauty gurus go through their makeup collections and clear out products that are expired or that they don’t want. While they give away or sell makeup they don’t want, there is often a great deal of expired makeup. Paige, for instance, goes through a bin of lipsticks, noting that “I know that 75% of the lip products in there are expired.”²⁴⁵ Pointing out the sheer number of expired products is antithetical to the environmental movement that Wood references, yet is perhaps indicative of early stages of the recent “deinfluencing” movement.²⁴⁶ Both Paige and Davison acknowledge the excess of makeup they own in their decluttering videos, and attribute the surplus of makeup to their jobs—in other words, if they were not professional beauty gurus, they would not have nearly that much makeup.

Conclusion

Despite the widespread claim that the beauty community is dead, there are beauty gurus who regularly post makeup-related content on YouTube. However, it is evident that current industrial conventions of the genre account for competitors, thus suggesting a more fragmented social media landscape. There is marketplace competition in the digital beauty world, so the sales work that these influencers do is not just about selling material products, but about advertising YouTube. As such, beauty YouTubers cannot solely share their love of makeup with their audiences; they must position themselves as distinct from beauty TikTok: as such, they sell their history, their authenticity, their natural beauty, and their seemingly moral superiority.

It is worth noting that all four beauty gurus have TikTok accounts, yet their primary activity is on YouTube. Indeed, Westbrook only has one video on her TikTok page. Future

²⁴⁵ Jamie Paige, “SPRING CLEANING! Decluttering My Makeup + Closet!,” YouTube, April 16, 2021, video, 30:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7MCz5Ox2f0>.

²⁴⁶ Mariah Espada, “TikTok’s ‘Deinfluencing’ Trend is Here to Tell You What Stuff You Don’t Need to Buy,” *Time*, January 31, 2023, <https://time.com/6251346/tik-tok-deinfluencers-reviews/>.

research might account for how beauty YouTubers brand themselves on TikTok. As it currently stands, their primary branding is on YouTube. Social media platforms rapidly evolve and as such, YouTube beauty gurus' public relationships with TikTok may change in the next few years.

Both the longstanding and new conventions of beauty YouTube reflect dominant ideologies—the case studies I introduced here reaffirm neoliberal, postfeminist logics. In other words, they represent a feminized genre online that does not challenge the status quo. Studying these ideologically dominant texts, then, lays the groundwork for exploring the possibilities of subversion in YouTube's beauty community. As stated by Klein:

Once a genre, its corpus, and its recurrent characteristics are sketched out (a necessary first step in any genre study), we must step back from the 'center' of the genre, where many genre studies begin and end, and instead venture out to the 'borders' of its generic corpus, where the films that do not fully comply with the rules of the genre reside.²⁴⁷ While this claim is in reference to film, the same holds true for social media. Importantly, the case studies in the following chapters do not reject these generic norms wholesale. If they did, they could be easily dismissed as not beauty videos. Instead, they play with the discursive and aesthetic norms of the beauty videos in ways that reveal systemic injustices, sometimes contradict themselves, and provide viewers everyday sites of resistance.

²⁴⁷ Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, & Defining Subcultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 21.

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Chapter Two: Subversive Motherhood: Sociality, Affect, and Temporal Framings in the Vlogs of RawBeautyKristi

There is a notable shift in beauty vlogs. In the wake of this “third wave” of the beauty community (2018-present), many of the original beauty gurus are becoming mothers. Framing motherhood as a pivotal turn in their lives, these beauty gurus document their struggles and victories with motherhood through daily vlogs, “slices of life,” and Q&A videos. They may feature the occasional beauty tutorial or product review, but as beauty gurus center everyday experiences of motherhood, becoming a mother is marked as a fundamental change in oneself: *mother* is not just a role; it is a lifestyle. Indeed, motherhood content in the beauty space mirrors the broader emergence of a new genre on YouTube—the family vlog. Here, parents (usually mothers) share daily vlogs of caring for their children, family vacations, and household maintenance. This is a new genre, and as such, research on the family vlog is just starting to emerge. Abidin’s notion of “micro-microcelebrities” sheds light how a new generation of children are gaining attention online due to their parents’ popularity.²⁴⁸ Family vloggers’ performance of calibrated amateurism—technological and discursive claims to authenticity in the wake of social media’s increased formalization—is largely positively regarded among viewers, raising few questions about child labor in the influencer industry.²⁴⁹ This phenomenon opens the door to ethical questions of children’s privacy and consent on platforms. Indeed, questions of childhood exploitation, surveillance, and family vlogging’s increasing blurring of the public/private divide should be explored further.

²⁴⁸ Crystal Abidin, “Micromicrocelebrity: Branding Babies on the Internet,” *M/C Journal* 18, no. 5 (2015).

²⁴⁹ Crystal Abidin, “#Familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labor,” *Social Media + Society* (2017): 5.

RawBeautyKristi is not a family vlogger per se, as she notes being intentional about her child's privacy. Instead, she is a well-known beauty YouTuber who has recently become a mother and documents her experience as a new parent. Sitting at 1.18 million subscribers, RawBeautyKristi is a staple in the beauty community. She is a notable case study not only in her popularity and sustained visibility over the years, but in her negotiation of digitally performing her roles of beauty expert and mother. This negotiation reinforces platform demands in some ways, such as performing negative affect, but also demonstrates RawBeautyKristi's resistance to being constituted as the ideal, "can do" mother and beauty guru. Simply depicting motherhood online is not an inherently resistive act. Despite recent claims about the subversive nature of "mommy blogs," depictions of motherhood that focus on individual psychology and ignore structural obstacles can certainly align with the commercial aims of digital platforms. Indeed, mommy blogs can serve as demonstrable sites of postfeminist, neoliberal selfhood that conflate compulsory sociality with political solidarity. However, I argue that RawBeautyKristi's content moves beyond what Catherine Rottenberg coins *neoliberal feminist* depictions of motherhood.²⁵⁰ In the beauty space, RawBeautyKristi negotiates the expectations of contemporary beauty gurus by following relevant trends while also revealing the impossible temporal demands that the beauty industry has on new moms. Additionally, she performs motherhood in ways that honor the privacy of her child while simultaneously unveiling the bleak and unglamorous aspects of the role. Lastly, she highlights an aesthetic disconnect between "full glam" and "tired mom," which frames aesthetic labor as incongruous with motherhood. As such, she provides a lens into examining identity performance that challenges mediated depictions of motherhood as inherently rewarding and fulfilling. In this chapter, I argue that RawBeautyKristi resists dominant

²⁵⁰ Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.)

conceptualizations of digital motherhood *and* YouTube beauty work by performing negative affect as a symptom of alienation, decentering western and masculine temporal structures, and complicating aesthetic labor in relation to neoliberal motherhood.

Mediated Motherhood

Motherhood as an institution is a site of hegemonic disciplining of femininity, reinforcing neoliberal norms, and framing women's happiness as contingent on birthing and raising a child. Mediated motherhood has long been theorized as a site of constituting idealized mothers; in fact, Douglas and Michael's seminal piece on new momism argues just how influential mediated motherhood can be. Here, the authors conceptualize "new momism as "the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children."²⁵¹ Discourses of new momism have become so pervasive, the authors argue, due to mass mediated depictions of mothers as selfless figures who contain endless energy to devote to their children. A symptom of a postfeminist ethos that emerged in the early 90s, new momism argues that women do, in fact, have choices, yet forcefully suggests that choosing motherhood will result in happiness that women cannot find in other external (or internal, for that matter) sources. Updating this theory for the digital world, despite the democratizing ethos of new media platforms, highly visible content rewards feminized cultural outputs that reinforce dominant norms of femininity.²⁵² In relation to motherhood, successful femininity reflects what mass media has been instilling in us for decades, which includes discourses of tireless, passionate, and intensive mothering.

²⁵¹ Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined all Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 25.

²⁵² Sophie Bishop, "Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 69-84.

Motherhood narratives on film, television, and social media suggest that once women make the (correct) choice of becoming mothers, they must engage in what Hays calls intensive mothering.²⁵³ Here, women are called to be the primary caretakers of their children, and to devote a majority of their time to childrearing. Intensive mothering rejects comparisons between paid labor and raising children, as proponents of this model argue that the latter practice is a natural skill for women, and that it is morally the right thing to do. Intensive mothering, then, suggests that women should pour their time and energy into motherhood, as raising children in this way is a sacrificial act for the greater good. RawBeautyKristi does not completely reject or reinforce intensive mothering; rather, she highlights the nuances and complexities that YouTube's depictions of motherhood invite. Looking solely through a temporal framework, one might argue that Kristi does engage in intensive mothering. At the same time, her narratives of motherhood complicate notions of the endlessly positive, devoted, and fulfilled mother.

In addition to negatively affecting working class mothers who cannot devote endless time to their children, intensive mothering obscures racial disparities present in mediated motherhood. Cultural connotations of successful mothering are not solely wrapped up in time-related devotion. Regardless of the temporal freedoms or constraints that Black and brown mothers face, they are always already seen as lesser than their white counterparts. Photographic depictions of motherhood on blogs and social networking sites like Instagram show that white motherhood suggests higher levels of altruism and moral superiority. Shome's work on global motherhood, for instance, discusses how white mothers of adopted children are visually articulated as saviors. In other words, whiteness is associated with discourses of being angelic

²⁵³ Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (Hew Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.)

and morally good.²⁵⁴ Black mothers, on the other hand, are deemed a threat if they do not establish close proximity to whiteness either through familial relationships or adherence to respectability politics.²⁵⁵ Patricia Hill Collins's work on controlling imagery suggests that dominant depictions of Black mothers promote notions of mammy figures, matriarchs, or welfare mothers.²⁵⁶ This literature suggests that connotations about "good" mothers is more complex than simply partaking in heteronormative familial structures and devoting a lot of time to motherhood. In fact, good mothers are associated with white mothers, thus forcing Black and brown women to push back against these controlling images only to gain little recognition as culturally worthy mothers. From an intersectional perspective, racially Othered mothers who are also in working class positions must confront dominant associations of good mothers with middle-upper class women. Here, RawBeautyKristi's positionality must be accounted for. She is a wealthy, cisgender, white woman who is in a heterosexual marriage. These positions make her socially accepted and embraced as a culturally competent and good mother. Thus, she has more leeway to express her frustrations with motherhood, given her culturally designated position as morally good and naturally gifted at caring for others.

Motherhood as institution is a political site for several reasons. First, celebrating motherhood as a necessary element of a woman's experience has economic motivations. Dana Cloud argues that politicians' seeming embrace of family values was actually a justification for slashed welfare programs and governmental support. Americans were called upon to care for

²⁵⁴ Raka Shome, "'Global Motherhood': The Transnational Intimacies of White Femininity, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 5 (2011): 392.

²⁵⁵ Jonathan Ward, "Making Black Motherhood (In)Visible: The Importance of Race, Gender, and Nation in the Mediation of Meghan Markle on Instagram, *Women's Studies in Communication* 44, no. 2 (2021): 241.

²⁵⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 72.

their families and see sites of moral good in domestic spaces, instead of protesting lack of support from the government. Indeed, to politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, the family as a unit replaced the nation state. Discourses of family values, then, function to give American citizens a site to channel their energy outside of the public sphere.²⁵⁷ Similarly, Rottenberg's theorization of neoliberal feminism argues that this brand of feminism centers neoliberal discourses of individualism and self-sufficiency, but with that, it also encapsulates the reproductive impetus to produce children. Someone must be incentivized to birth and care for future laborers, which is something that neoliberalism alone does not account for. Neoliberal feminism, then, suggests that once women have achieved economic stability, they should seek happiness through motherhood.²⁵⁸ In other words, women are conditioned to see happiness as the end goal—happiness becomes a symbol of flourishing. This affective element of motherhood corroborates Sarah Ahmed's conceptualization of happiness. Here, Ahmed states, "happiness does not reside in objects; it is promised through proximity to certain objects. The promise of happiness takes this form: if you do this or if you have that, then happiness is what follows. The very possibility of being pointed toward happiness suggests that objects can be associated with affects before they are even encountered."²⁵⁹ She goes on to argue:

The family, for instance, might be happy not because it causes happiness, or even because it affects us in a good way, but because of a shared orientation toward the family as being good, as being "what" would promise happiness. The promise of happiness comes with certain conditions: to place your hope for happiness in the family might require that you approximate its form. We have to make and to keep the family, which directs how we spend our time, our energy, and our resources.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Dana Cloud, "The Rhetoric of <Family Values>: Scapegoating, Utopia, and the Privatization of Social Responsibility," *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 4 (1998): 387-419.

²⁵⁸ Rottenberg.

²⁵⁹ Sarah Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 3 (2019): 576.

²⁶⁰ Ahmed, 577.

Similar to critical-cultural scholarship on authenticity, Ahmed's work suggests that happiness is not a stable, unmoving quality that comes from within. Instead, certain objects are coded as inviting happiness, depending on the race, class, or gender positionalities of the subject in question. Because women are called upon to seek happiness, they look for this elusive promise in objects and familial structures. Thus, motherhood is not just framed as a choice, it is posited as the choice that will finally give women what they have long been questing for: happiness. For the most part, mass media reinforces this affective thread, framing mothers as fulfilled, self-actualized beings. RawBeautyKristi provides a notable intervention to this affective ideal, as she is distinctly unhappy in many of her videos that center motherhood. While performance of unhappiness does well on YouTube—particularly in the form of women's breakdown vlogs—this negative affect paired with thoughts on motherhood complicate the narrative that a woman's quest for happiness is tied to child-rearing.

Digital Motherhood

The emergence of mommy blogs raises the question: does digital media reinforce dominant depictions of motherhood seen in mainstream media? Despite the demonstrable findings that digital platforms sustain hegemonic raced, classed, and gendered hierarchies,²⁶¹ there is a body of literature that suggests there is radical potential in the motherhood blogosphere, also known as the *mamasphere*. Broadly, a resistive reading of mommy blogs understands mothers' reciprocal connectivity as a means of pushing back against neoliberal claims to individualism. Van Cleaf's digital maternal gaze suggests that mommy blogs can resist the male gaze by focusing on the distinct surprises and pleasures that motherhood brings to the everyday lives of women. Pleasurable connections to the self, one's child, and other mothers

²⁶¹ Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

foregrounds motherhood as a collective experience. Importantly, the mediated nature of the digital maternal gaze invites mothers to share seemingly realistic visual *and* textual accounts of motherhood. In other words, these visual accounts disrupt online platforms' emphasis on mediated performances of aspirationality. Additionally, the networked community of mommy blogs "brings another newly described pleasure: connecting with others (writers, readers, mothers) through various digital platforms. Repeatedly, women/mothers/writers claim that the digital social world provides a space to connect and that this digital connection itself is pleasurable."²⁶² Here, Van Cleaf argues, connectivity can engage a feminist politic by "complicat[ing] existing narratives of motherhood."²⁶³ Van Cleaf's argument suggests that the resistive element of mommy blogs is their affordances for connection that reject the impetus for women to perform curated, sexualized, and aspirational selves online. While connectivity is also imbued into the technological architecture of blogs and in part reinforces capitalist aims, Van Cleaf argues that solely seeing this connectivity as emblematic of soulless capitalism is an oversimplified reading of what is actually a site of maternal solidarity. Indeed, Kristi does explicitly note feeling solidarity with other mothers when she shares her trials and tribulations of motherhood online. At the same time, failure to account for material manifestations of solidarity dilutes and depoliticizes the concept, which is commonplace for postfeminist readings of empowerment. In other words, connectivity is baked into YouTube's logics, and is part of what makes its architecture so enticing for users. Yet we must bear in mind that connectivity is not synonymous with collectivity. Bonding over shared feelings of isolation and extreme fatigue in the mamasphere does not interrogate the systemic structures that make mothers feel isolated or

²⁶² Kara Mary Van Cleaf, "The Pleasure of Connectivity: Media, Motherhood, and the Digital Maternal Gaze," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 13, no. 1 (2020): 38.

²⁶³ Van Cleaf, 38.

fatigued in the first place. This emphasis on individual joys, pains, and pleasures obscures the mamasphere's pervasive privileging of white, middle-class stories of motherhood and the inequitable brunt of emotional and free labor that mothers face.

Other literature notes how digital representations of motherhood can challenge mainstream media's tendencies towards new momism. Orton-Johnson calls upon scholars to see mommy blogs as "alternative spaces of resistance" that illuminate everyday challenges of motherhood and speak against the cultural "mommy wars" that pit mothers against each other. Instead, they are social networks that provide solace, support, and social capital for mothers at a time of identity transformation."²⁶⁴ Corroborating claims of mommy blogs' emancipatory potential, Lopez challenges expressly revolutionary connotations of the term "radical act," and argues that everyday depictions of motherhood does important political work in its ability to generate new cultural expectations of mothers. Indeed, the architecture of blogging invites a fragmented picture of motherhood that better accounts for contradictions and nuances of motherhood that films and television shows cannot adequately capture. Blogs allow for this fragmentation in motherhood narratives due to their tagging function and lack of reliance on serial or episodic storytelling.²⁶⁵ Furthermore, Anderson and Grace posit that mommy blogs can be a form of feminist consciousness raising in that these blogs offer social support and creative solutions to obstacles. They argue that identity politics come to the fore in some mommy blogs and women can enact change with an awareness of their unique positionalities. Of course, it is important to note that these changes occur on an individual level, rather than a systemic level.

²⁶⁴ Kate Orton-Johnson, "Mummy Blogs and Representations of Motherhood: 'Bad Mummies' and Their Readers," *Social Media + Society* (2017): 3.

²⁶⁵ Lori Kido Lopez, "The Radical Act of 'Mommy Blogging': Redefining Motherhood Through the Blogosphere," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5 (2009): 738.

There is merit in challenging a strictly political economic approach to feminist resistance. Examining these everyday transgressions is an important line of inquiry in critical-cultural scholarship, as evidenced in the works of Fiske and McRobbie. Mothers' discursive acts within for-profit platforms may resist a narrow view of what successful motherhood looks like. However, simply circulating these experiences without any kind of concrete, systemic resistance or change results in what Dean calls a "zero institution," which "is an empty signifier. It has no determinate meaning but instead signifies the presence of meaning. It is an institution with no positive function."²⁶⁶ The individual level of these acts must not go unnoticed, as they largely do not interact with public structures of policies. By that same token, women's commiseration with fellow mothers can have resistive elements while by and large reinforcing compulsory sociality online. Compulsory sociality is seen as a feminized element of digital labor that associates platform visibility and growth with networking.²⁶⁷ Additionally, developing these relational ties is an under compensated form of affective labor that women embark on to achieve future economic success online.²⁶⁸ As such, women's affective, commiserative ties might not be *in spite of* the structure of digital platforms; indeed, the sociality of women's motherhood blogs might actually be *because of* the demands of them. Compulsory sociality in the mommy blog, then, may actually be a symptom of the "mompreneur" phenomenon.

The digital "mompreneur" mirrors that of the offline housewife. In other words, the labor that women engage online speaks to a long history of women's work being undervalued and undercompensated due to its ties to "domestic" tasks. Feminist criticism challenges Marxist

²⁶⁶ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 42.

²⁶⁷ Brooke Erin Duffy and Becca Schwartz, "Digital 'Women's Work?': Job Recruitment Ads and the Feminization of Social Media Employment," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 8 (2018): 2979.

²⁶⁸ Brooke Erin Duffy, "The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2016): 441-457.

theory's neglect of women's work as a worthy site of scholarly inquiry. Indeed, the theory of alienation from factory work justly applies to domestic labor, given the exploitative and disproportionately feminized nature of the second shift in the home.²⁶⁹ Digital housewifery can occur among content creators and social media users, which exemplifies the *produser* phenomenon. For instance, social media content curation internships are largely framed as feminized forms of labor, which then justifies the little to no pay.²⁷⁰ However, a similar dynamic pervades everyday social media use among those who do not generate profit from their digital activity. Mamaspheres are active environments of posting, commenting, and commiserating over shared experiences of motherhood. Many of the individuals who constitute this space are unpaid. Theorizing this phenomenon as the "digital mundane," Wilson and Yochim note its function as "the affective machinery of everyday life."²⁷¹ In other words, mothers visit these digital spaces that tie everyday moments to joy, pain, and nostalgia. The digital mundane, then works in conversation with the idealized neoliberal woman's relationship with affect. Imbued in the affective experience of digital motherhood is cruel optimism: a future-oriented mode of feeling, cruel optimism chases societal fantasies of happiness.²⁷² In the context of digital motherhood, "by anticipating the successful achievement of idealized, selfless affective management, mommy blogs encourage readers to engage with the fantasy of a future that will never arrive."²⁷³ Much like in neoliberal feminism, digital performances of motherhood center affective promises of a fulfilling future. Mothers who do not always feel fulfilled, like Kristi, are conditioned to feel like they have failed as a mother, and that they are enacting their natural roles incorrectly.

²⁶⁹ Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (New York: Routledge, 2016.)

²⁷⁰ Erin Duffy and Schwartz, 2974.

²⁷¹ Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim, *Mothering Through Precarity: Women's Work and Digital Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 17.

²⁷² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁷³ Kelsey Cummings, "'But We Still Try': Affective Labor in the Corporate Mommy Blog," *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 39.

Affect and motherhood have complicated ties. First and foremost, affective labor is gendered. Drawing from Hochschild's findings on emotional labor—in which women in the service industries mask intrinsic emotions with external emotional cues to appease customers— affective labor works to produce a collective affect among audiences.²⁷⁴ Affective labor holds gendered implications due to its emphasis on the care and management of others. In the mamasphere, affective labor is largely directed towards one's children and other mothers in that digital space.

Thinking more broadly about affect, digital media, and womanhood, YouTube's attention economy adds another level for content creators specifically to negotiate. Part of the response to YouTube's algorithmic demands for livestreaming is for women content creators to engage negative affect through content like breakdown vlogs. Commodifying sought-after attributes of the digital microcelebrity, YouTubers who perform negative affect can make claims to confessionality and intimacy with their respective audiences. In other words, vlogs that center seemingly socially acceptable mental health struggles—such as anxiety and depression—solidify a YouTuber's claim to authenticity.²⁷⁵ Anxiety vlogs, then can be a form of what Bishop calls “authenticity labor,” as “vloggers strategically and deliberately participate in popular online genres, such as the anxiety video genre, with entrepreneurial intent. The anxiety video could be seen as a deliberate strategy to generate visibility, as these videos often acquire a higher than average percentage of views.”²⁷⁶ The seemingly less glamorous depictions of motherhood, then,

²⁷⁴ Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.)

²⁷⁵ Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, “Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, Self-Exposure and the Productivity of Negative Affect,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 85-98.

²⁷⁶ Sophie Bishop, “#YouTuberAnxiety: Anxiety as Emotional Labour and Masquerade in Beauty Vlogs,” in *Youth Mediations and Affective Relations*, eds. Susan Driver and Natalie Coulter (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 95-96.

may actually be a form of strategically leveraging negative affect in order to generate visibility online, thus aligning with corporate interests. Between compulsory sociality in digital spaces and the turn towards negative affect as visible (and profitable), claims about the resistive nature of mommy blogs lay flat.

To be clear, RawBeautyKristi does perform sociality to a degree online and she does engage negative affect. Yet her sociality is far lesser than her colleagues and her negative affect stems from alienation. Alienation is an undertheorized concept in relation to content creators, with the exception of scholars like Baker and Rojek, who posits that “just as the industrial worker described by Marx was alienated by the product they produced, the emphasis on emotional management can alienate lifestyle bloggers from themselves and others.”²⁷⁷ Working in conversation with this theorization, I posit alienation as twofold: 1) RawBeautyKristi is alienated from her role as mother *and YouTuber*, due to community pressure to perform happiness and fulfillment—thus supporting Marxist notions of workers’ alienation from their commodified labor²⁷⁸—and 2) RawBeautyKristi is alienated from others due to westernized conceptualizations of idealized mothers and her viewers’ binaristic thinking about good motherhood. Because RawBeautyKristi is a digital creative, viewers are conditioned to see her as an autonomous, free mompreneur who gets paid for sharing her authentic life. Yet in reality, her work is beholden to YouTube’s attention economy, which privileges audience metrics. As such, if RawBeautyKristi’s audience does not view her representations of motherhood as appropriate, her engagement suffers. Thus, the disciplinary force of the algorithm conditions creators to

²⁷⁷ Stephanie Baker and Chris Rojek, *Lifestyle Gurus: Constructing Authority and Influence Online* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020): 191-2.

²⁷⁸ Mike Healy, *Marx and Digital Machines: Alienation, Technology, Capitalism* (London: The University of Westminster Press, 2020).

perform identity in ways that are culturally recognizable and favorable to YouTube audiences.²⁷⁹ Kristi's authentic experience of motherhood, then, may not translate well to the screen. She must capture her role as mother in a neatly packaged way, which creates distance between Kristi as mother and RawBeautyKristi as mompreneur. As such, branding the self can be just as alienating as working in a factory. As a popular, (mostly) family-friendly beauty channel, RawBeautyKristi does at times fall into the trap of positive affect and feminine normativity. Yet seeing her negative affect in a new way, alongside her counterhegemonic temporal framings and aesthetic labor as challenging neoliberal norms of empowerment provides a new lens through which to see everyday resistance in the digital mundane.

A Brief History of RawBeautyKristi

RawBeautyKristi was a "second wave" beauty guru who started her channel in April of 2013. She currently has 1.16 million subscribers on YouTube, whose about page reads, "RawBeautyKristi - A place where you can feel confident in getting HONEST Product Reviews, Makeup tutorials, Health, Life & Weight loss advice and MORE. All with a sense of humor and a bit of a potty mouth. Join me!"²⁸⁰ YouTube is her primary platform, but she does have profiles on Instagram (543,000 followers), Twitter (249,000 followers), Facebook (131,000 followers), and TikTok (71,000 followers). While she does not have a regular upload schedule, she averages at about 2-3 videos per month. This average, at times, gets interrupted by daily upload challenges wherein Kristi resolves to upload to YouTube every day. Despite Kristi's recent channel identity crises in which she communicates uncertainty about the future of her channel, she still semi-regularly uploads 10-40 minute videos ranging in topics from cosmetics to life updates (see

²⁷⁹ Kelly Cotter, "Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 4 (2019): 895-913.

²⁸⁰ "About," *YouTube*, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@RawBeautyKristi/about>.

image below for a list of Kristi's recent uploads). Notably, all of Kristi's videos are featured in private, domestic spaces such as her home or her garden.

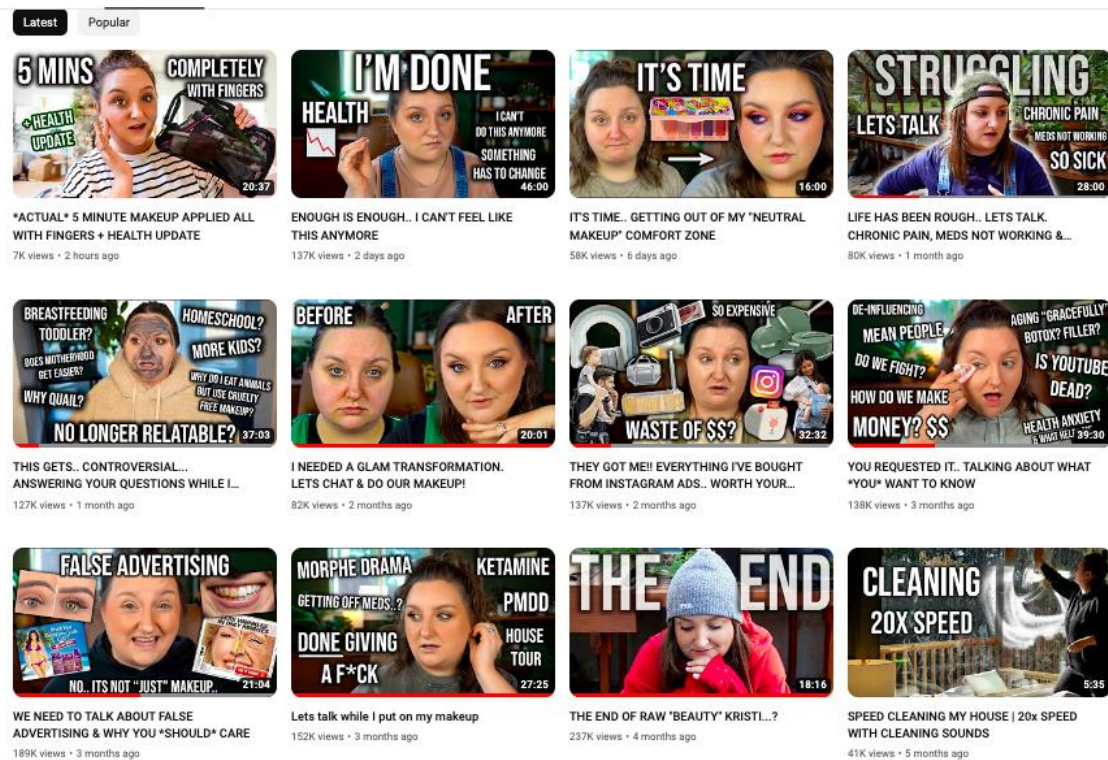


Figure 2

In the era of product reviews and beauty challenges, RawBeautyKristi provided fan favorite genres with a seemingly uncensored twist. Indeed, the “raw” in “RawBeautyKristi” comes not from the products that Kristi uses, but from an ethos of rawness and realness that she brings to the digital beauty world. She largely focused on beauty videos throughout the beginning of her career, but also created vlog-style videos that featured her home life. She was open about her struggles with infertility and documented her pregnancy in 2020. Since 2020, Kristi's channel has heavily centered motherhood in addition to continuing her exploration with makeup. She has a second channel with her husband Zach, titled *The Sweet Life of Zach and Kristi*, in which they document their progress with building a greenhouse and curating a home garden. Zach works for Kristi full time as her editor, which is a transition Kristi has talked about

in her videos. Currently, Kristi posts makeup and motherhood-related content on YouTube full-time, and has also spanned Instagram and TikTok. She has also created makeup collaborations with the popular cosmetic company *Colourpop*.

Negative Affect and Alienation

In one of Kristi's first postpartum videos on YouTube, "Postpartum Truth|This is Really Hard" (March 2021), she brings her vlogging camera on a walk with her. She looks exhausted, downtrodden, and completely spent. She still begins her video with an obligatory "hey guys," but there is noticeably less enthusiasm to her greeting. There is no music or professional lighting. In the introduction of this video, Kristi states the following:

A lot of times, specifically on social media, everything seems to be put in rose colored glasses. I mean this in a different way than just people posting their highlights. I mean that when you see things online, even this video that you're watching...it can almost come off movie like. It can come off like this is produced. That it's kinda funny and quirky and whimsical. 'But first coffee, am I right, ladies?' But life feels anything but that. When you're in the midst of feeling like you're struggling and you see people online and it's almost like you're watching a movie...there's cute music and a smiling mother in full face of makeup...and you're like 'well fuck.'²⁸¹

Upon first glance, we might see Kristi's musings as a false binary between a "real" offline world and a "fake" digital one. However, further reflection invites us to consider an affective dynamic that Kristi is tuned into. While social media might not be entirely divorced from a seemingly objective reality, its affordances invite affective management. Post-production in lifestyle vlogs can suggest a warm, relaxed home environment that emphasizes happiness. As production value becomes integral in a professionalized platform environment, family vloggers may feel incentivized to turn a raw depiction of domestic life into a plucky, refined, and more importantly *edited* scene. Despite the social and cultural value of authenticity performance on YouTube, the authenticity contains an edited quality of ease. In other words, family vloggers are in their own

²⁸¹ RawBeautyKristi, "Postpartum Truth|This is Really Hard – PPD, PPA & Overwhelm," YouTube, March 13, 2021, video, 44:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJA2H7bZDyc&t=268s>.

domestic environments and they are doing real, mundane tasks, but the quality of this domesticity and mundanity is masked with aspirationality. The post-production editing, then, makes the everyday luxurious and enviable.

While this dynamic bridges authenticity and aspirationality for viewers, Kristi's comments tune into the alienating effects of her experience as both YouTube viewer and YouTube creator. Mommy vloggers perform happiness and claim fulfillment in their labor as both mothers and content creators. First, this performance corroborates neoliberal feminist discourses of balance. The popularity of mommy vloggers suggests that, indeed, women can have a family and a career—in fact, they might even be intertwined. Furthermore, it aligns with Ahmed's critiques of feminine happiness as based on proximity to culturally significant objects—in this case, "boss babe" entrepreneurship and child-rearing. We might expect manual laborers to feel alienated from their labor, but certainly not Internet celebrities. The affective demands of the woman YouTuber necessitate performance of happiness and fulfillment. Yet Kristi sheds to light a dynamic that gets edited out of normative family vlogs—the expectation to perform the "fulfilled mother" exacerbates the curated nature of content creation *and* calls into question her aptitude for motherhood.

Kristi goes on to discuss that even though this video might feel movie-like to some, her postpartum life feels like she's barely surviving and getting through the day. She notes how hormonal changes make her feel excessively emotional and how her anxiety spiked to the degree of causing severe sleep deprivation. Importantly, she brings up the fact that nobody prepared her for this. In all of the freely available motherhood content online, no one talked about just how impossibly hard the first few months of motherhood can be. Kristi's surprise and concern indicates a first glance into alienation from her role as mother:

It's criminal, how bad you feel after a baby is born. It's supposed to be, according to the Internet, according to everyone, according to even moms who have experienced it, the most blissful time of your life. Who said that? Why?...Why are we still allowing this lie about motherhood to perpetuate?²⁸²

This observation challenges the above scholars' claims on the resistive nature of mommy blogs.

Even though mommy blogs might feature complaints about everyday hardships in motherhood, imbued in these narratives is the affective claim that *overall, it is worth it*. Essentially, the micro-level qualms with everyday frustrations do not disrupt the normative understanding of motherhood as fulfilling and self-actualizing. In RawBeautyKristi's video, she does not offer the argument that motherhood is worth the day-to-day suffering. In fact, she flips the script of the joys of unconditional love, noting that she loves her child so much, it is agonizing to live with. Kristi then calls into question the assumed positivity of intensive mothering. The uncritical embrace of intensive mothering as natural and fulfilling obscures the mental distress of pouring endless time and energy into motherhood.

Kristi continues to push back against idealized depictions of motherhood long past the initial difficulties of caring for a newborn. Motherhood communities often talk about how the first four months of parenting are simply survival mode, but that it gets significantly easier afterwards. While Kristi does agree with this sentiment, she continues to highlight the disconnect between the fantasy and reality of motherhood. This disconnect is so jarring, Kristi notes, because it makes her feel like a bad mother. After taking a mental health crisis-related hiatus from YouTube, Kristi discusses how new momism ideologies configured into her crisis. She explains how her increasing anxiety about her son's health made her stop sleeping entirely, which made her feel like she was losing her grip on reality. Again, Kristi observes how online depictions of motherhood did not prepare her for the experience: "the transition into motherhood

²⁸² RawBeautyKristi, "Postpartum Truth|This is Really Hard – PPD, PPA & Overwhelm."

was really shocking to me because I think that a lot of time you have an idea of what it's going to look like based on what you've seen online or what other people describe."²⁸³ She goes on to state how barely surviving motherhood—and wondering how anyone else has survived it—made her feel like a bad mother. Even in the midst of performing intensive mothering and literally worrying herself sick about her child, she believed that she was failing at motherhood. This demonstrates just how pervasive the affective pressures of motherhood are. One can go through the motions of motherhood in ways that directly support intensive mothering, yet still feel deficient. In other words, Kristi sheds to light that she is deeply unhappy, and therefore must be doing something wrong.

In some ways, Kristi's performance of negative affect generates increased visibility online. The quantifiable success that "I Finally Got Help" (November 2021) received corroborates Bishop's observations that mental health vlogs do well on YouTube. When considering this video in relation to lifestyle vlogs, it reinforces dominant understanding of women as emotional and sad. However, we must take into account that Kristi also speaks to the motherhood community, which privileges positive affect above all else.

RawBeautyKristi's performance of negative affect also illuminates her alienation from others, which pushes back against the notion of mamaspheres as spaces of solidarity. First, Kristi notes how western familial structures invite isolation and alienation. "Postpartum Truth" specifically calls into attention how an ethos of individualism makes child-rearing a solitary practice: "they always say it takes a village to raise a child. I don't have a village. I don't even have a person other than Zach...a lot of times in western culture, we don't have a village."²⁸⁴

²⁸³ RawBeautyKristi, "I Finally Got Help... Where I've Been," YouTube, November 10, 2021, video, 59:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEF91H2ZeH8>.

²⁸⁴ RawBeautyKristi, "Postpartum Truth|This is Really Hard."

This statement draws direct attention to white, western ideals of individualism and challenges neoliberal politicians' rhetoric suggesting that families should replace the support of the nation-state. Pushing back against the notion that western norms are ubiquitous, Kristi suggests that a collectivist view of motherhood would mitigate her struggles with motherhood. While this observation still obscures America's role in making childcare programs inaccessible to those outside of the upper-middle class Kristi uses her critique of western individualism to make clear that sociality is not synonymous with solidarity. Kristi is a highly successful YouTuber who has many fans and followers. She converses with subscribers often through DMs and comments sections on YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram. Yet this sociality is part of Kristi's professional portfolio—it does not translate into the day-to-day life and support of motherhood. As such, Kristi illuminates how affective sociality lacks the materiality that she and mothers like her need. In fact, Kristi makes clear just how isolated she is due to the nature of her work and observes that she does not deal with loneliness in productive ways.²⁸⁵ As such, the affective cultivation of online relationships that Kristi dutifully employs is a part of aspirational labor that gets her little material value in the form of collective support.

The compulsory sociality in Kristi's job can actually deter her from revealing the difficulties and tensions in motherhood, which suggests that polished and refined versions of motherhood do best in digital spaces. She faces collective suspicion and push back from her viewers when she articulates uncomfortable or painful parts of motherhood, thus shedding to light the cultural expectation that mothers conflate their newfound roles with joy and fulfillment. Imbued in these accusations is the postfeminist emphasis on choice and empowerment. In her video titled "Time is a Thief...Trying to Live in the Moment" (June 2021) Kristi sobs on camera

²⁸⁵ RawBeautyKristi, "Let's Talk...Answering All of Your Questions," YouTube, May 14, 2021, video, 44:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZGWM5HTieQ&t=180s>.

about how motherhood reveals just how fast time speeds by. She observes that her viewers see these crying episodes as unusual and incongruous with normal digital depictions of motherhood, noting, “a lot of people want to diagnose you with shit like [losing yourself to motherhood] when you start talking about it, especially when you’re crying on camera on YouTube.”²⁸⁶ These viewer accusations present interesting layers to intensive mothering and new momism. While modern expectations of mothers still center around affective intensity surrounding child-rearing, there emerges a new, neoliberal ideal: balance. Rottenberg argues that “a ‘happy work- family balance,’ in other words, is currently being (re)presented as a progressive feminist ideal.”²⁸⁷ Because of this new layer of idealized motherhood, viewers see Kristi as failing if she does not adequately balance her hobbies and identities outside of motherhood in addition to being the primary caretaker of her child. Even in performing negative affect in ways that are culturally coded as feminine—and subsequently adhering to YouTube’s platform demands of sharing breakdown vlogs—Kristi’s performance is still interpreted through the lens of failure.

As Kristi’s journey through motherhood progresses over the course of a year, the collective suspicion she faces from her audience makes her share increasingly less online. This dynamic illuminates the boundaries of vulnerability and self-disclosure online. Breakdown vlogs are visible forms of new media among women influencers generically, but discursively they must remain within the constraints of gendered norms and expectations. Complaining about motherhood, even *with* the disclaimer that you love your child above all else, falls outside of these gendered constraints. At the same time, however, Kristi must respond to viewer demands to be given unfettered access to her everyday life. Kristi spends a great deal of time in survival

²⁸⁶ RawBeautyKristi, “Time is a Thief...Trying to Live in the Moment,” YouTube, June 19, 2021, video, 24:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ji9W0GHf6j0>.

²⁸⁷ Rottenberg, 14.

mode as a mother, yet she must also defend her choices not to share each detail of her survival mode with her audience:

The more I talk about [motherhood] and the more open and honest I am about it, the more shit that I get and the hatred I get because if you're not fully just blissfully living on this cloud, like I love my son more than I've ever loved anything on this world, but I tend to give a very real account of what I experience in this role and this journey of motherhood, and some people don't like that. They think, 'well why would you put yourself in this situation? You should only be happy, what about all the other people?' There are a lot of why don'ts and what ifs.²⁸⁸

The phrase “you can only be happy” is a powerful one. It indicates just how deeply a woman's quest for happiness runs. This external demand for a woman's happiness contributes in part to Berlant's notion of cruel optimism: we surmise that achieving happiness is of utmost importance, we internalize hegemonic conceptualizations of what will make us happy, and we spend our lives chasing this affective future. The irony of cruel optimism, however, is that the very object of happiness that we seek contributes to our dissatisfaction.²⁸⁹ This is not to say that motherhood is purely a form of misery—rather, the cultural script of motherhood is one of a false binary. The myth of motherhood contains a mystical quality: it is supposed to be a transcendent experience that clarifies a larger purpose that reveals what true, unconditional love feels like. In reality, it is often sleep deprivation and anxiety. Imbued in that anxiety is the feeling that unhappy mothers are failing at their natural roles.

Kristi's performance of negative affect does get her a lot of views on YouTube, but her viewers' responses suggest a more complicated negotiation of what constitutes appropriate negative affect among women online. Kristi's breakdown vlogs are at odds with what is expected of her because she attributes a role that she is supposed to find fulfilling and natural as a significant factor of her unhappiness. In a neoliberal digital environment, unhappiness may be

²⁸⁸ RawBeautyKristi, “Let's Chat While I Put On Some Makeup,” YouTube, August 6, 2021, video, 24:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgzlV9JEFSE>.

²⁸⁹ Berlant.

discussed, but it should be in relation to the self. In other words, unhappiness narratives must focus on an internal battle that obscures material realities. Kristi does at times discuss her mental health struggles, but her observations that motherhood directly causes her unhappiness is at odds with the larger cultural narrative. Additionally, neoliberal discourses that center mental health contain western framings of conquering: the struggle should be “won,” and women should share their stories of mental anguish from the other side.²⁹⁰ Kristi is not on the other side, and draws attention to the fluid, unlinear nature of negative affect.

Temporal Framings

Kristi’s negotiation of motherhood presents a dynamic that is at odds with the entrepreneurial ethos of digital labor. The modern YouTuber is fast. Above all else, they are production machines—they create videos consistently, catch on to trends fluidly, and pour endless hours into cultivating their self brand. Digital work has a sense of urgency and immediacy, as there exists a scarcity mindset that if someone does not create something now, a competitor will create it shortly thereafter.²⁹¹ Temporal rhythms on YouTube are akin to masculine monochronic structures of time: this temporal framing is task-oriented and linear. It aligns with calendar scheduling and privileges hard deadlines. Kristi performs a negotiation of time that recognizes these monochronic demands, yet fails to measure up to them. Instead, she offers what Burnett et al call polychronic conceptualizes of time. Here, the focus is on multi-tasking in ways that do not adhere to checking off to-do lists. Unlike technological multitasking, which aligns with capitalist views of efficiency, polychronic conceptualizations of time resist the sole focus on profit-driven tasks. Instead, communal care-work is centered: caring for the elderly and for children is a major

²⁹⁰ Scharff.

²⁹¹ John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007).

part of this temporal framing.²⁹² While this framing can in part reinforce dominant conceptions of care with women, it provides an alternative lens to capitalist conceptualizations of efficiency.

Kristi's care work through motherhood makes her culturally legible as appropriately feminine, but is at odds with the fast-paced demands of beauty work. Interestingly, these are both highly feminized realms on YouTube, but are seemingly in competition with one another. One of the demands of beauty gurus on YouTube is novelty. New makeup releases constantly come out, and it is the expectation of the beauty guru that she will test out and give her opinions on these new releases. Imbued in this demand is that the successful beauty guru can devote her primary attention to a fast-evolving cosmetics industry, which is directly counter to the demands of intensive mothering. Kristi's beauty-specific content draws attention to this paradox, as she observes the antiquated nature of her products and reveals how quickly products are deemed outdated. When she first came back from her maternity hiatus on YouTube, Kristi played with products that were distinctly dated (i.e. older than a year old). However, even as she ostensibly caught up to industry standards, she still questioned the novelty of her reviews. Kristi's video "Testing Out the Colourpop Limoncello Collection" reveals the rapid pace of the beauty industry: "because makeup moves so quickly in this industry and something that was considered cool a few weeks ago is old news now. When I looked this up, I was like, 'should I use that in a video?' and I literally just received it, when I was like, 'how old is this?' and I was like 'a week a half.'"²⁹³ Here, Kristi draws attention to the absurdity of a taken-for-granted pace in the beauty world. She corroborates a larger critique within the anti-haul movement that the pace of the

²⁹² Ann Burnett et al, "'I'm on a Rollercoaster': Women's Social Construction of Time," *Communication Studies* 71, no. 1 (2020): 152.

²⁹³ RawBeautyKristi, "Hmm...Testing Out the Colourpop Limoncello Collection," YouTube, May 6, 2021, video, 20:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpKkiu3xSv0>.

beauty community is unsustainable—personally and environmentally, yet further politicizes the critique by noting its incongruity with the demands of motherhood.

Resisting the chase after novelty is also one of RawBeautyKristi's claims to authenticity. Even before becoming a mom, Kristi was renowned as a “different” beauty guru who viewers could trust because she would always give her real opinion about products. Kristi draws attention to the “Raw” and “Kristi” part of her username, thus contributing to a cohesive self-brand as authentic. In a “full face of first impressions,” Kristi lets her viewers know that she has to spend a few weeks using a product before she can officially recommend it to her audience.²⁹⁴ By highlighting the slower speed at which she recommends products, Kristi frames herself as a trustworthy figure who actively resists temptation to align herself with the fast past of YouTube.

In keeping with Sharma's argument that stating we are all living in the same rhythms of a “sped up” culture is an oversight of uniquely situated experiences with time, Kristi does not simply claim that motherhood necessitates efficiency or speed.²⁹⁵ Instead, she notes how she experiences time in ways that do not meet hegemonic demands of work-life structures. Across videos, Kristi states that her son sleeps in 30 minute increments, so she too must arrange her life in 30 minute increments. This observation challenges the idea that mothers have fewer hours in the day to accomplish tasks; rather, it is that the organization of mothers' time does not align with masculine conceptualizations of efficiency. Creatives in particular are conditioned to seek “flow states,” in which someone can spend hours getting immersed into their craft.²⁹⁶ As such, despite the recent increase of mompreneurs, the ideal creative entrepreneur is male. Indeed, Kristi's statement that “it's very rare that [she's] able to get into a flow state...without

²⁹⁴ RawBeautyKristi, “Hmm...Full Face First Impressions Testing ‘New’ Makeup...,” YouTube, November 22, 2021, video, 34:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuzcBBvj-3U>.

²⁹⁵ Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Books, 2014).

²⁹⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

interruption” frames flow states as an ideal she is lacking and that keeps her from succeeding online.²⁹⁷

Demands of “keeping up” are both foundational to new media work and beauty community participation. In addition to contradicting the demands of motherhood, discourses of keeping up do not align with mental health recovery. While stories of mental distress do contribute to the success of anxiety vlogs, the ideal neoliberal woman shares her recovery story from the other side. She is fully recovered, healed, and back to productively contributing her labor.²⁹⁸ Thus, linear framings of recovery are privileged as culturally legible narratives. Not only does Kristi share her mental struggles while they are happening, but she illuminates the circular nature of her mental health journey. In a “GRWM Q&A,” Kristi discusses her experience with generalized anxiety disorder, stating, “there will be days that are bad and there will be days that are good. That’s just part of the recovery process for me.”²⁹⁹ In other words, Kristi challenges the notion that vlogs must follow a digestible narrative structure that mirrors those of mainstream media. Given that feminized YouTube content mirrors postfeminist discourses of the makeover paradigm, “transformed women” narratives generate visibility. Of course, postfeminist makeover content differs from 20th century makeover content, as external makeovers purport to reflect internal transformations.³⁰⁰ Kristi’s videos do not align with the pathologized transformation narrative. Indeed, she visually transforms from bare-faced to made-over, yet she makes clear that her internal “transformation” is circular and slow. In other words, her mental health struggles are not serialized in an attractive narrative structure. It is unsettling

²⁹⁷ RawBeautyKristi, “Time for a Change! Creating My New ‘Lifestyle’ Background With Your Help! Come Shop With Me,” YouTube, January 8, 2002, video, 15:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRkNxYA8-H0>.

²⁹⁸ Scharff.

²⁹⁹ RawBeautyKristi, “Get Ready With Me While I Answer Your Questions!” YouTube, April 6, 2021, video, 40:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3oGIIaai7o>.

³⁰⁰ Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

for audiences not to receive resolution—here, Kristi’s viewers must face the messy, complex nature of human lives.

Despite the popularity of anxiety vlogs, they contradict temporal demands of being flexible and “always on.” Over the past 2 years, Kristi’s vlogs have been somewhat irregular, which she attributes to her poor mental health:

So I put up a couple videos recently and I don’t want every video to be like ‘I’m back,’ and then have it be like, ‘oh no she wasn’t.’ That’s never what I want out of this YouTube thing. But you guys give me so much grace and I’m really trying to give myself that grace as well. But at the same time, a big thing that does help me feel better and I always forget is the feeling of getting work done and being productive and having a solid work ethic and work foundation. It’s easy to have that be the first thing to fall off for me because when I’m working on my mental health and everything like that and my physical health, it just kind of falls to the wayside because it is the type of job that I can take a bit of time off when needed. But at the same time, I need to be putting effort in.

In this clip, Kristi highlights her absence as part of her mental health journey, rather than her mental health journey as a documentable facet of her social media presence. This temporal disruption—i.e. not posting regularly—is also a gendered disruption. In this case, Kristi does not meet the demands of feminized labor to stream her struggles on YouTube. In other words, the very thing that would get Kristi views online is kept from her audience. She also highlights the temporal tensions between flexibility and visibility. In being her own boss and working on her own time, Kristi embodies the flexible mompreneur. Yet at the same time, platforms frame this flexibility as pressure to be always on by privileging consistent uploads and foregrounding tanking views in the creator studio.

The temporal tensions in Kristi’s mental health are not just in her lack of posts; they are present in how she represents the experience of her leisure time. A through-line in Kristi’s motherhood depictions is inability to sleep due to severe anxiety. Here, Kristi frames time not as fleeting, but as agonizing. As a mother, Kristi notes facing constant advice to sleep when the baby sleeps. In response to this advice, Kristi states that she cannot do that because she feels

anxious about her child's well-being while he sleeps. After taking two months off due to mental health crisis, Kristi discusses her agonizing experience of time in the video, "I Finally Got Help...Where I've been." She states that her anxiety spiked after her kid got sick and TikTok subsequently pushed out videos about kids who died from pediatric cancer. Following that incident, Kristi's mental health worsened and she was unable to sleep, was "losing grip on reality," and explains feeling, "it was as if I were watching the world end around me. The world is over. I am dying. Everyone around me is burning up in a fiery death, but nobody can see it or hear it or feel it."³⁰¹ This feeling came in part from severe sleep deprivation, as she would not sleep for a single minute throughout the night. This framing of time is not one of efficiency or speed; it is one of agonizing waiting for things to get better. Time as agonizingly slow is also present in Kristi's discussion of medication: after finally agreeing to go on anti-anxiety medication, Kristi's doctors warned her that she would not notice a difference for 4-6 weeks. As Kristi notes, "it is agonizing to wait when you feel that bad."³⁰² A lack of time is not the issue in this case; it is the arrangement of time that causes Kristi mental distress. This arrangement does not align with the flows of capitalism, and as such, is deemed a deterrent from her success. Kristi cannot use nights to rest and subsequently be productive the following day. In other words, her sleepless nights counter her productivity, which threatens her value as a laborer.

Lastly, Kristi's temporal framings illuminate neoliberal feminism's impetus for women to live in the present moment while also planning for the future. While Kristi does not entirely challenge the pressures of presentism, she presents a complex negotiation of competing temporal demands of women. Rottenberg argues that "living in the here and now institutes an affective investment in the status quo, while helping to further transform even the most intimate aspects of

³⁰¹ RawBeautyKristi, "I Finally Got Help...Where I've Been."

³⁰² "RawBeautyKristi, "I Finally Got Help...Where I've Been."

our lives— namely, our psychic life— into ones informed by a market metrics, where proper orientation and investment promise profitable returns... once aspirational women do have children, there is a normative shift in temporality and thus a reorientation toward the present, which encourages women to focus on their own well-being in the here and now.”³⁰³ Neoliberal feminism does privilege aspirationality, but it conditions women to aspire towards child-rearing, due to its economic motivations. Orienting women towards the future can be risky long-term, however, as imagined futures are the basis for protest and revolution. As such, neoliberal feminism has formulated a means of supporting the status quo while also incentivizing change *within* oppressive systems of power. Kristi, as someone who has achieved her duty of motherhood, is now conditioned to strive towards presentism. At the same time, her child—the very thing that allows Kristi the privilege of the present—makes her see time as fleeting, fast-moving, and unable to hold onto. Her 2021 video titled “Time is a Thief...Trying to Live in the Moment,” shows this temporal paradox:

I was thinking back to all the sleepless nights and nursing him. And sometimes I’d be sitting there nursing him to sleep for hours...I’d have to hold him to sleep and he’d only sleep on me. I remember thinking in those moments, ‘it’ll be so much easier when he can sit up on his own and play on his own. When will that happen? Now that he’s grown up, I’m like, ‘this is what you wanted.’

Kristi goes on to note that even though the current moment is what she wanted, she is still unhappy. Her nostalgia for the past and her prior orientation towards aspirationality makes her unable to live in the moment. The added social pressure to live in the moment seems to exacerbate Kristi’s dissatisfaction, as once again, she feels that she has failed as a parent. In observing that “time is a thief. Being a parent has made me realize that more than anything,” Kristi makes evident the tension of neoliberal feminism. There is a human being growing at a

³⁰³ Rottenberg, 130.

rapid pace, which for Kristi, is a physical symbol of the future. Yet at the same time, as a mother, Kristi faces relentless messaging *not* to think about the future.

Aesthetic Labor

Demands of the modern mother are not just affective and temporal, they are also aesthetic. This dynamic is present among all mothers, but is a particularly complex site of negotiation due to Kristi's identity as a beauty guru. Benedictis and Orgad state that "in contemporary popular representations the 'good mother' is frequently articulated through, and celebrated and praised for, her sexually attractive look... 'now mothers themselves are encouraged to look 'hot.'"

However, we would argue that the immense labour required for this idealised maternal image is largely masked; the beauty practices involving self-surveillance, self-disciplining and self-blame underpinning a 'hot' look are denied."³⁰⁴ Invoking Kristi's video about the idealized mother that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Kristi is at odds with the aesthetic demands of neoliberal motherhood and beauty YouTube, as she is too busy taking care of her child. These demands are largely temporal, which Kristi negotiates by focusing on motherhood-related content in the early days since her child's birth.

As Kristi does have more time to engage cosmetic play, she frames changing aesthetic preferences as symbolic of a significant identity shift. In other words, Kristi's identity as a mother is visually represented in evolving makeup looks. While Kristi gained fame for bold looks, her current preference for natural makeup is something she attributes to motherhood. Kristi's cosmetic evolution, then, is a performance of authenticity. As a mother, she uses cosmetics to signal a notable shift in her identity. While this change first came from lack of time

³⁰⁴ Sara De Benedictis and Shani Orgad, "The Escalating Price of Motherhood: Aesthetic Labour in Popular Representations of 'Stay-At-Home' Mothers," in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, eds. Ana Sofia Elias et al (Thousand Oaks: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 102.

and neglecting makeup routines due to her being in sheer survival mode, it evolved into a feeling of incongruity between doing “full glam” looks and caring for her child. In her video, “Products I am Loving & Hating Right Now!,” Kristi explains her move away from bold fake eyelashes:

I love a big lash. But ever since having my baby, I struggle with having giant lashes. I feel like I look clownish lately and I don’t know why. Maybe it’s just because it’s the juxtaposition of me standing there with full glam on next to this little baby who’s got this perfect skin he’s just so pure and then I feel so not pure.³⁰⁵

On one hand, Kristi’s statement about her evolution away from bold makeup invokes visual representations of authenticity, which does align with hegemonic performance of femininity online. As such, she engages the attention economy in ways that are culturally legible and rewarded on YouTube. On the other hand, Kristi complicates normative demands of successful neoliberal motherhood. She directly counters the ideal mother who wears a full face of makeup and highlights the incongruity between motherhood and aesthetic labor. This is a transgressive act in relation to both beauty gurus and “Mommy vloggers,” as both kinds of influencers often sport noticeable amounts of makeup. However, this transgression does not threaten Kristi’s visibility, given the current popularity of the “anti-haul” movement.

The “anti-haul” genre pervades YouTube’s contemporary beauty community. Here, beauty gurus discuss new launches they will not purchase. This genre is popular, due to its intersections with environmentalist concerns, as well as consumer fatigue that comes from over a decade of keeping up with cosmetics companies’ new launches. With the anti-haul movement, there is a recognition that makeup expires, and there are only so many eyeshadow shades one can have. Anti-haul videos help promote a sense of intimacy and authenticity between creators and viewers, due to the affective intensity of disliking a product—it also provides reassurance that

³⁰⁵ RawBeautyKristi, “Products I am Loving & Hating Right Now!” YouTube, July 23, 2021, video, 21:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bhhd4t8w4tI&t=1008s>.

beauty gurus are not sell outs who promote all products for personal profit.³⁰⁶ Preceding (and perhaps informing) TikTok’s “deinfluencing” movement, the YouTube anti-haul does seem to have a clear social justice element to it, though it is still neoliberal in nature, given its emphasis on individual consumption choices. Kristi’s evolution away from bold makeup achieves visibility in YouTube’s current attention economy, as she brings in a close cousin of the anti-haul: the de-clutter video. Kristi has turned de-cluttering her makeup collection into a series where she foregrounds letting go of a previous identity that was bold and sparkly. In her 2022 video titled “Getting Rid of Over Half of My Makeup|Declutter With Me,” Kristi decides to get rid of her body glitter, noting, “I used to keep stuff like this because I’d be like ‘well what if one day I one day really wanted my body to be shimmery and then I had already decluttered my body shimmers, then what do I do?’ Can I tell you how many times I wanted my body to be shimmery? Zero times...These are gorgeous, but on Kristi 2016...I’m not the one anymore.”³⁰⁷ Kristi uses her declutter to adhere to pervasive norms of presentism, yet also resists the pressure to be a seemingly aesthetic mother.

It is worth noting that the “declutter” video is not inherently resistive. Indeed, it can actually be a symptom of overconsumption and fleeting trends. As we saw in chapter 1, the declutter video can stem from a number of different reasons: expired makeup, change in seasons, or discursive claims to renewed authenticity. That being said, the subversive nature of Kristi’s declutter comes from her subsequent refusal. She clears out old makeup, but does not consume equal quantities of makeup that reflect current seasons or cosmetics trends. Instead, her declutters visually and discursively represent an internal shift from beauty guru to mother.

³⁰⁶ Rachel Wood, “‘What I’m Not Gonna Buy’: Algorithmic Culture Jamming and Anti-Consumer Politics on YouTube,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 9 (2021): 2495-2858.

³⁰⁷ RawBeautyKristi, “Getting Rid of Over Half of My Makeup|Declutter With Me,” YouTube, January 18, 2022, video, 29:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DPLD7D3pGs>.

Kristi's evolutions do not always align with makeup trends—while “clean girl” makeup is currently trending, Kristi notes feeling like she is using techniques that were popular in 2018. In other words, despite her personal cosmetic evolutions, she feels stuck in the past in relation to the rest of the beauty community.

Kristi's pushback of normative aesthetic labor also highlights the impracticality of marrying full glam looks with motherhood. At times, her cosmetic play affects her son. Wearing lip gloss, for instance, makes her unable to kiss her son.³⁰⁸ She also states, “the only thing is that I hate wearing makeup when I kiss my baby, he gets little flecks of sparkles all over his face and makeup on him. I hate that. But, gotta get used to that, baby, mama does beauty videos.”³⁰⁹ Despite the ultimate conclusion that Kristi will continue to wear makeup, she sheds to light the obstacles of aesthetic motherhood. Indeed, in cultivating intimacy with her followers through cosmetic play, she impedes intimacy with her son. As such, the conflation of leisure and labor presents conflicts of interest, rather than tying together seamlessly. Kristi's professional world is one of makeup, and visual manifestations of her professional life threatening her personal life can lead to perceptions that she is a bad mother.³¹⁰

Conclusion

Digital “mommy blog” and “beauty guru” spaces are both highly feminized cultural outputs that can reinforce hegemonic ideologies of what it means to be an empowered and successful woman. Precarious working conditions around YouTube make it especially important for women to enact these performances, given their accordance with advertiser interest. Kristi presents a case study

³⁰⁸ RawBeautyKristi, “Let's Chat! Get Ready With Me Using Colorpop X RBX|Motherhood, Finding Myself + Things are Better!” YouTube, April 22, 2021, video, 40:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTtZVUn6pio&t=2141s>.

³⁰⁹ RawBeautyKristi, “I Needed a Makeover!|Makeup, Hair & Outfit That Make Me Feel Most Beautiful,” YouTube, May 10, 2021, video, 29:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w7achYIns0&t=1551s>.

³¹⁰ Marylyn Carrigan and Joanne Duberley, “Time Triage: Exploring the Temporal Strategies that Support Entrepreneurship and Motherhood,” *Time and Society* 22(1) 2013: 92-118.

of someone who does not revolutionize what it means to be a mother, and does not entirely disrupt Lopez's notion of "radical." However, she does reveal that industrial norms of sociality on YouTube do not translate to solidarity. Furthermore, rather than solely placing the onus of her dissatisfaction and alienation on herself, she attributes her negative affect to the very platforms that she works for. In other words, her feelings of disconnect and loneliness are not ameliorated by YouTube—if anything, they are exacerbated by the platform. This dynamic presents an important layer to contemporary new momism: the audience. Kristi is hesitant to share her negative feelings about motherhood due to her audience's reflection of normative ideals. Thus, it is not simply mediated depictions of motherhood that reinforce intensive mothering as the norm; it is the audience's reception and circulation of these ideals that complicate discourses of motherhood in digital spaces. Kristi's audience in particular is an interesting site of this phenomenon, as a large portion of her audience may not be parents themselves. Kristi gained popularity as a beauty guru, not a mommy blogger, and as such, she may depict motherhood for audiences that do not share that lived experience.

The implications of Kristi's disruption of temporal norms extend beyond herself and mothers like her. While it is important to shed light on the merit of polychronic conceptualizations of time in motherhood communities, it is also important to consider temporal arrangement on platforms like YouTube. Looking broadly at the climate of YouTube, many creators have reached breaking points of extreme burnout. Increasingly, YouTubers take multiple month-long hiatuses and come back explaining how the pressure to create consistent *and* groundbreaking content poorly affected their mental health. Kristi provides an example of the tensions of content creation: the very things that would make compelling content (motherhood, mental health struggles), keep her from making content. Despite the supposed temporal freedoms

that digital entrepreneurship allow, idealized arrangements of time still follow traditional work structures.

Lastly, despite her positionality as a beauty guru, Kristi challenges notions of the ideal mother wearing a full face of makeup. Her evolution with cosmetics is reflective of a significant identity shift. Instead of wearing full glam looks as a symbol of thriving as a mother, Kristi privileges natural makeup as symbolic of her fundamental change. Visual symbols of authenticity do well in digital spaces, so this practice is not entirely revolutionary. However, paired with temporal disruptions, Kristi's aesthetic labor practices directly counter norms of the successful beauty guru: she does not keep up with new trends or new launches.

The case of RawBeautyKristi is one of negotiation: she successfully negotiates norms of visibility on YouTube. In many ways, she reinforces ideals of the self-made woman who can do it all. Yet her public performance of doing it unhappily and unwell is an important critique of the affective, aesthetic demands of the modern woman. Kristi's unhappiness does not end after a viral breakdown vlog. Her unhappiness is resistive in that it forces us to look beyond the individual pathology of the mother—we are confronted with flaws in the childcare system, cultural scripts of successful motherhood, and temporal demands of a seemingly democratizing and accessible entrepreneurial ethos.

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Chapter Three: Nappyheadedjojoba and Platform Intimacy

Ti, known to her online audience as Nappyheadedjojoba, begins her YouTube video with a bare face, stating that “this is obviously a ‘Get Ready With Me.’” She elaborates:

I’m going to dabble in a bit of blush draping, which I’ve always wanted to try. Why I’m doing this on a video where I kind of need to be able to focus my mind on what I’m talking about and not makeup, I don’t know. But we’re gonna see how this goes. So prepare yourself for the kooky. So I’m gonna do base first, and then I’m gonna focus on the blush draping eye area at the same time....I don’t know that I’m gonna have that much color on the lid. Pretty much just sheer color, if anything. Anyway, this is not about makeup.³¹¹

The video is about makeup (as is the case with “Get Ready With Me” videos in the beauty community). It features the usual practice of cosmetic application, references to beauty techniques, links to beauty products in the video description, and the slow motion shots that show off the finished look. The video is also, however, about the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, and, more generally, white abuse of Black bodies.

Black content creator Nappyheadedjojoba uses this video to discuss the abuse, exploitation, and harassment that people of color have been facing for centuries, and to wake up her complacent white audience: “when it comes to the systemic murder and subjugation and exploitation of Black people, if you’re not outraged, you’re a deluded self-absorbed asshole.”³¹² This tone and subject is not common for a “Get Ready With Me” video; as such, Nappyheadedjojoba performs a hybrid of political commentary and beauty work.

If you lack prior knowledge about Nappyheadedjojoba’s YouTube content, you may find this video jarring. The latter half of the video’s title, “Ti Talks GRWM,” indicates to beauty insiders that Ti will put on makeup and chat about subjects that are on her mind. A search for

³¹¹ Nappyheadedjojoba, “It is Time to Get Out of Here. It’s Time to Go.” [Ti Talks GRWM,” YouTube, May 9, 2020, Video, 24:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M151_5GKBcU.

³¹² Nappyheadedjojoba, “It is Time to Get Out of Here.”

“GRWM” on YouTube suggests that the genre privileges videos that feature women getting ready for dates, doing first day of school looks, and participating in “girl talk.” Indeed, there are established cultural constraints on what appropriately feminine women should be getting ready for and industrial constraints on which “GRWMs” generate visibility. While Ti’s video is moderately visible (55,389 views), the contents of her video violate generic norms. First, Ti makes clear that she is not participating in normative rituals of femininity; instead, she is getting ready to queer Instagram’s beauty sphere. In this 2020 video, Ti notes that she is in lockdown and is not getting ready to go anywhere. Instead, she is doing a “challenged, self-imposed” to do a month long “slay a day in May” challenge on her Instagram.³¹³ Here, she challenges herself to get creative with her makeup looks. As we can see in the images below, the #SlayaDayInMay looks do not adhere to contemporary norms of appropriate femininity. They are certainly not natural and support hegemonic interpretations of Black play as excessive. As such, Nappyheadedjojoba’s praxis of “slaying” is countercultural and disrupts the beauty community’s obsession with the clean girl aesthetic.

³¹³ Nappyheadedjojoba, “It is Time to Get Out of Here.”

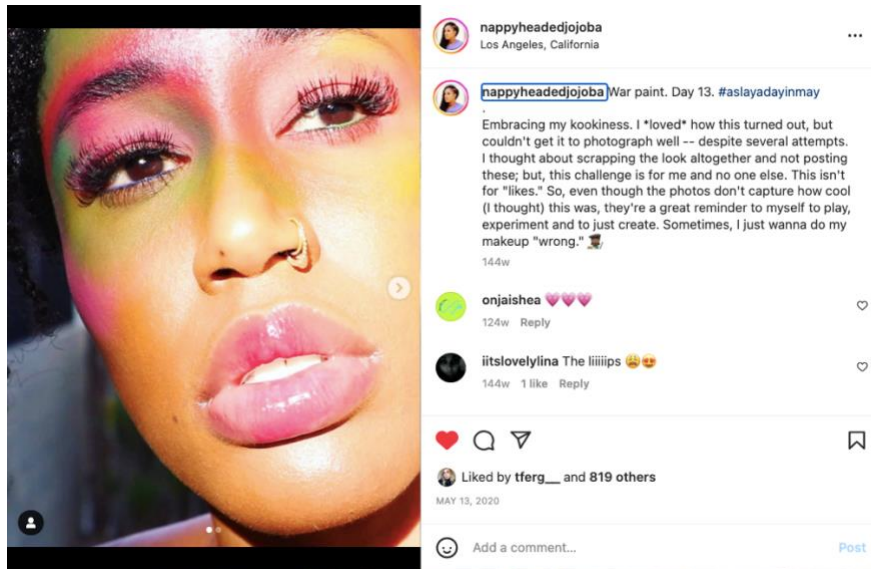


Figure 3

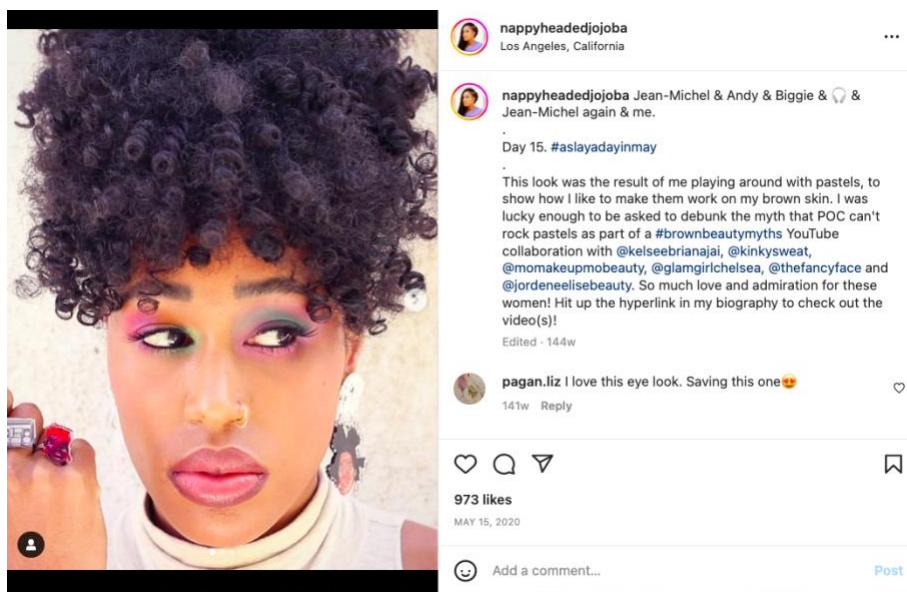


Figure 4

Beyond her aesthetic performance, Nappyheadedjojoba's discursive strategies violate the typical GRWM video. While currently popular on TikTok, the word "slay" has queer, feminist origins. In addition to connoting Black women's empowerment, "slaying is a modality of

troubling the narrative.”³¹⁴ Indeed, it breaks the constraints of appropriate femininity and provides a lens for alternative ways of being. Rooted in ballroom culture, slaying is a mode of kinship building—in Nappyheadedjojoba’s case, this reference to #SlayADayInMay builds kinship with other marginalized women who are deemed “too much.”

The content of Nappyheadedjojoba’s video also violates norms of the “GRWM” genre. She discusses in detail the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, her experience getting “blue lives matter’ed by a white woman,” and the limitations of social media activism. None of this is particularly advertiser-friendly. All of it implicates white women as part of the problem. This is uncommon for a YouTube video, whose structure relies on the financial support of advertisers and the eyeballs of white women (a key consumer base). Even though Nappyheadedjojoba’s financial earnings largely come from Patreon support, Patreon’s lack of recommendations or discovery features suggests that Nappyheadedjojoba must generate investment in her brand through her YouTube content. As such, I explore how Nappyheadedjojoba cultivates audience support through what I call *platform-specific-intimacy*. Disrupting Marwick and boyd’s notion of online context collapse, I define platform-specific-intimacy as the discursive strategies that content creators employ to cultivate intimacy with specific audiences on social media platforms. Platform-specific-intimacy suggests that, rather than speaking to an imagined audience, content creators are deeply familiar with the cultural contexts and ideological backgrounds of their viewers. In addition to this cultural awareness, platform-specific-intimacy also theorizes the industrial constraints that inform what kinds of intimacy practices are valued. These constraints are deeply ideological, which disrupts the idea that platform architecture is neutral. These

³¹⁴ Lauron Kehrer, “Who Slays? Queer Resonances in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*,” *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 1 (2019): 88.

intimacy practices are informed by monetization structures on platforms; indeed, the monthly donation structure of Patreon results in audience demands of direct interaction.

Honoring the centrality of relational labor on social media platforms, Nappyheadedjojoba employs this platform-specific intimacy to promote social activism online. Specifically, on YouTube, her incongruous references to makeup relieve tension, she utilizes beauty-specific terminology to familiarize her politics, she engages respectability politics, and she incorporates self-promotion as relational labor. On Patreon, she positions audience support as promoting creative liberty, she employs self-disclosure in relation to her politics, and she engages ratchetry as resistance. These strategies cultivate a sort of political authenticity. Through these intimacy strategies, Nappyheadedjojoba urges one seemingly apolitical audience to act against systemic injustice—namely racism and capitalism—and rewards another audience with self-disclosure. Through these distinct kinds of intimacy strategies, Nappyheadejojoba employs intimacy-as-urgency on YouTube and intimacy-as-reward on Patreon.

Methodology

Methodologically, I use Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) and Platform Studies. First posited by Brock, CTDA uses critical theory to reject a deficit model that frames marginalized digital media users as lacking in technical expertise. CTDA is a holistic methodology that examines the relationship between technological artifact, technological practice, and user discourse. Here, the architecture of a platform, including its affordances and constraints is conceptualized as a form of discourse. CTDA thus examines “interactions between technology, cultural ideology, and technology practice.”³¹⁵ Informing this method are Catherine

³¹⁵ André Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 1013.

Steele's digital black feminism³¹⁶ and Brock's African American cybercultures³¹⁷, in addition to my dissertation's larger conceptualization of visibility labor.

In conjunction with CTDA, I use Platform Studies to examine the architecture of YouTube and Patreon. Platform Studies examines communicative affordances and constraints on new media platform while also considering programmability and "connection of heterogeneous actors." As noted by Plantin et al, Platform Studies "focus[es] on rapidly evolving digital artifacts [and] shows how expression, communication, and knowledge are constrained within profit-driven corporate ecosystems."³¹⁸ A hybrid of cultural studies and critical political economy, Platform Studies examines user agency and resistance within a platform that simultaneously enables and constrains certain types of user discourse. In other words, the structures of platforms do not determine user behavior, yet they condition users to partake in normative behaviors through architectural elements such as "liking" and "sharing." Both methods highlight platforms as non-neutral entities that include unequal power relations. Working in tandem, CTDA and Platform Studies can reveal individual user discourse as a negotiation between cultural resistance and platform conventions.

The Story of Nappyheadedjojoba

Examining Nappyheadedjojoba reveals how marginalized content creators can negotiate two seemingly distinct genres on YouTube: the "Get Ready With Me" video in the beauty community and political commentary. Her YouTube programming started as a natural hair channel, which is a community source of joy, support, and celebration among Black women

³¹⁶ Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

³¹⁷ André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

³¹⁸ Jean-Christophe Plantin et al, "Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 294-295.

online. Nappyheadedjojoba has since “divested from the natural hair community” in favor of her beauty-video-political-commentary hybrid, which follows Steele’s observation that moving scholarly observation from digital Black barbershops to digital Black *beauty* shops centers experiences of Black women who encounter both white supremacy and patriarchy and use distinct rhetorical strategies to negotiate those intersecting forms of oppression.^{319 320}

Ti, who does not divulge her last name on social media, began her YouTube channel in 2011. She currently has 177,000 subscribers on YouTube. She is also on Instagram (17,000 followers), Patreon (whose membership count remains undisclosed), and Twitch (49 followers). She also has a merch line with products that feature her signature closing line, “never trust anyone with a Morphe code.” Her about page on YouTuber reads, “commentary. Beauty. Style. Fitness. Hair. And RayRay.”³²¹ She has consistently held a full-time job outside of digital entrepreneurship, in which she does Internet PR for undisclosed companies. She solely produced Black hair-care related content for the first 2 years of her channel and then moved into cosmetics and fitness content in addition to hair videos. She did fitness challenges, reviewed products, and shared her morning and evening routines. While her view count was not in the millions or hundreds of thousands, she routinely received tens of thousands of views. Starting in 2019, Ti began producing cultural commentary, focusing on topics such as anticonsumerism, dating, and beauty community drama. As such, Ti has long established herself as an insider in the beauty space, given her expertise with cosmetic application and hair care, as well as her intimate knowledge of beauty guru scandals.

³¹⁹ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Divesting from the ‘Natural Hair Community’ was Great for Me TBH.[Ti Talks (and Detangles,” YouTube, September 11, 2020, Video, 22:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJH0VaiMvQw>.

³²⁰ Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*.

³²¹ “About,” *YouTube*, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@nappyheadedjojoba/about>.

Much like RawBeautyKristi, Ti does not have a regular upload schedule on YouTube. She averages 1-2 videos a month, ranging from ~10-20 minutes. Her current videos feature cultural commentary and GRWM videos (which often also include cultural commentary). Her primary filming locations are what appears to be her bedroom and living room (see image below for a list of Ti's recent videos).

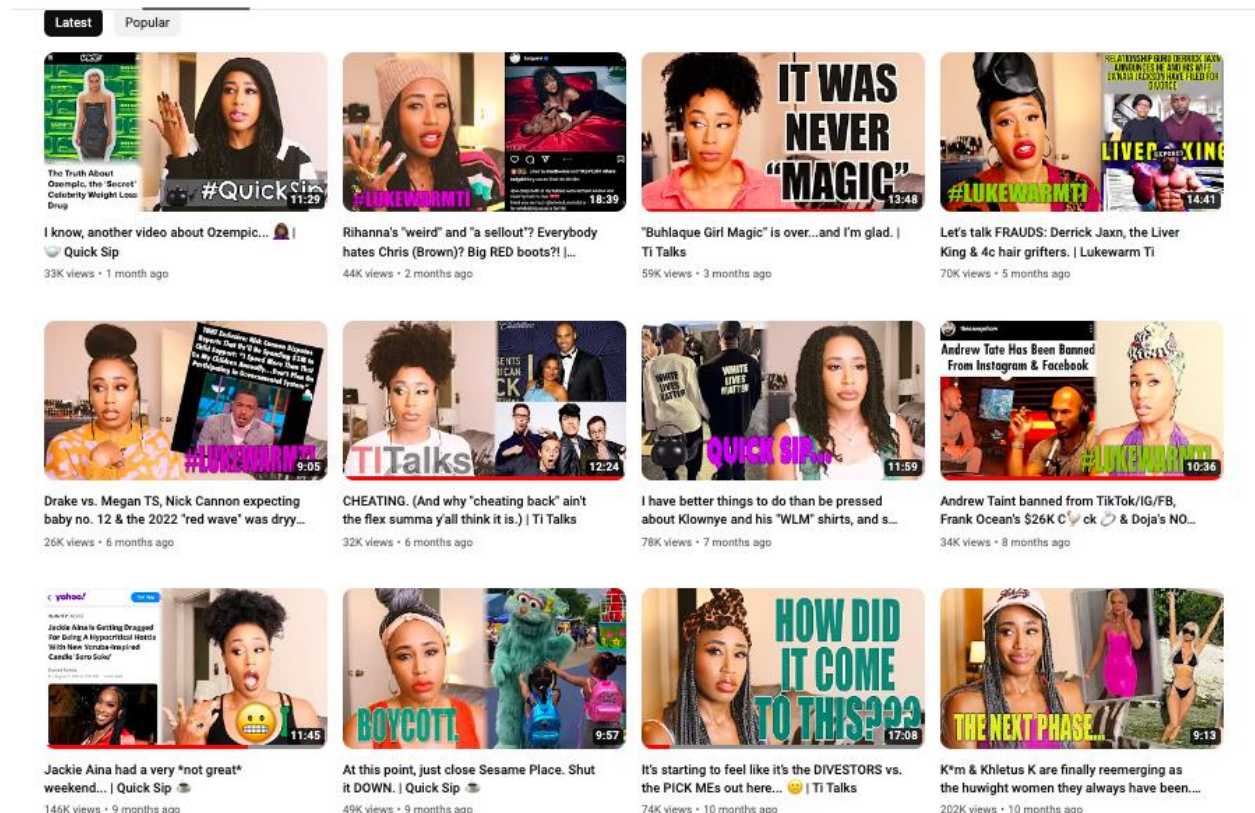


Figure 5

Ti's GRWM video titled "So, I Bought the Jackie Aina Palette. For Spite," marks the advent of her now staple series, "Ti Talks GRWM." Much like her previous content, this video still featured cosmetic application and links to relevant products in the description. However, imbued in this video were claims regarding the insidiousness of misogynoir. Using popular Black beauty guru Jackie Aina's eyeshadow palette as a reference point, Ti discusses how the lack of Black influencers in YouTube's beauty space is a problem unto itself, not to mention the

suspicion and vitriol that is disproportionately directed at those influencers by white audiences. Ti notes that this hate is expressed out of sheer desire not to see Black women succeed.

Since that first “Ti Talks GRWM,” Ti has semi-regularly posted that genre. An interesting shift has occurred in late 2019 when Ti started crowdfunding on Patreon, whose about page reads, “this is a place for the #napfam. I created this space so that we can be free to talk about things that matter (and things that don’t), freely, unfettered and uncensored. Everything from hot topics to social issues, from beauty to fitness, from fashion to food, and from hair care to [tea kettle emoji]. This is a space where I can connect with y’all, without the constraints of whatever YouTuber decides is not ‘advertiser friendly,’ and for us to have community.”³²² Ti’s Patreon features three tiers from which subscribers may choose: 1) “remonetizers” who pay \$1 a month—Ti states that these payments “mainly go toward equipment and production/post-production expenses, as well as helping to defray lost AdSense revenue from my videos being demonetized.”³²³ These patrons can vote on Ti’s video topics. 2) “Notification squad” who pay \$5 a month. These patrons can access livestreams and Zoom parties, can partake in the #napfam book club, have early access to YouTube videos, and can vote on future video topics. For full transparency, this is the tier to which I am subscribed. 3) “Ride or dies,” who pay \$10 a month. These patrons have access to ride-or-die exclusive videos, Zoom events, watch parties, and podcasts. They also have the other benefits listed in the other two tiers.³²⁴

It is important to acknowledge the ethical implications of researching Patreon. Patreon is a subscription-based service, so not all of Ti’s Patreon content is available to the public. That being said, researching Patreon does not fall squarely under the category of human subjects

³²² “About,” *Patreon*, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.patreon.com/nappyheadedjojoba/about>.

³²³ “Membership,” *Patreon*, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.patreon.com/nappyheadedjojoba/membership>.

³²⁴ “Membership.”

research. The Association of Internet Researchers emphasizes respect for research subjects and informed consent.³²⁵ Filming and posting content that is re-watchable on a semi-public platform functions as informed consent. However, recording a Zoom party for research purposes without informing the creator violates informed consent. As such, I did not include Ti's Zoom parties and book club meetings in my dataset.

While her earlier YouTube content seemed like an enclave community by and for Black women, Ti started directing her later YouTube content to a dominant (i.e. white) audience, thus functioning more as a satellite public. Satellite publics “find spaces separate from the dominant group but engage with other publics. The separation is not for purposes of physical protection, but to keep their cultural identity intact.”³²⁶ In Ti's case, her channel is intertwined with dominant publics, yet still employs Black women rhetorics that pay homage to the Black digital beauty shop. Patreon then took the place of YouTube's earlier enclave function.

Black Digital Resistance

I hold Nappyheadedjojoba's activist work in conversation with prior theorizations of Black digital resistance. Brock reminds us that it is important to look beyond labor, branding, and political economies of social media platforms to make sense of online Black communities. Brock suggests that framing Black digital use as simply responding to racism or being complacent in their own subjugation on white supremacist platforms is an oversimplified reading. Instead, taking a libidinal economic approach to Black digital use illuminates the affective, embodied joys and pains of being Black in America. As noted by Brock, the affective intensity of Black resistance is missing from cultural studies and political economic approaches to social media research. Brock's contribution complicates the accusation that marginalized content creators who

³²⁵ “Ethics,” *AoIR*, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://aoir.org/ethics/>.

³²⁶ Catherine Knight Steele, “Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics”, 113.

perform intimacy online are simply commodifying themselves and indulging the demands of the attention economy.³²⁷ Instead, this online connectivity is undergirded by *jouissance*, or excessive life. This is a particularly helpful model for understanding Nappyheadedjojoba's intimacy performance on Patreon. Given white supremacy's determination to identify and categorize Otherness, intimacy on Patreon can function as survivance through shared joy and worldbuilding.

Black women content creators must contend not just with racism, but with a patriarchal racism called misogynoir. Originally developed by Bailey, misogynoir "describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization."³²⁸ Media reinforces misogynoir through what Hill Collins calls controlling imagery. When they are not entirely removed from mediated spaces altogether, Black women are represented in stereotypical tropes such as the jezebel, welfare queen, or superwoman.³²⁹ These mediated tropes have material effects on Black women and girls, as they are perceived through the lens of controlling imagery. Indeed, as noted by Bailey, Black prepubescent girls will be asked if they are sexually active by teachers and nurses, due to the persistent aging up of Black girls.³³⁰ The controlling imagery that Black women face is one facet of the matrix of domination. In addition to the social elements of misogynoir, Black women also must navigate economic and political oppression. Black women's work is undervalued and overexploited, which is a strategy that keeps the American promise of social mobility out of reach. Under the conditions of

³²⁷ André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 34.

³²⁸ Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 1.

³²⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

³³⁰ Bailey, 64.

capitalism, separating laborers via race maintains a surplus of cheap labor. Politically, the institutions (education, law, medicine) that Black women navigate actively harm their communities.³³¹ There are material implications for Black women's ostensible deviance in these oppressive institutions. Take, for instance, Black tennis player Serena Williams's lack of brand sponsorships compared to her white counterparts³³² due to the cultural perception of her as a loud, threatening, and excessive Black woman.³³³ Oftentimes, institutional racism is a matter of literal life or death. Here, we might consider the striking numbers of Black women who have died at the hands of white doctors due to assumptions of patient hysteria.³³⁴ Social media does not soften the impacts of Black women's economic and political oppression, but it does complicate representational dynamics. Given social media platforms' shift from a representational culture to a presentational culture, Black women have some degree of agency over how to represent themselves online. However, Black women's identity performances outside of these recognizable tropes can result in audience confusion or even anger. In other words, the cultural constraints of recognizable identity performance condition Black women content creators to reify these stereotypes. Not doing so runs the risk of algorithmic obscurity.

It is important to note that overtly racist depictions of American Blackness are not a relic of YouTube's past. Indeed, we sit uncomfortably close to mediated minstrel shows on this very platform. Shane Dawson, one of the most popular YouTubers in the platform's history, had a running Blackface series, in which he exaggeratedly performed a character named Shanaynay.

³³¹ Hill Collins.

³³² *The Daily*, "Serena Williams's Final Run," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2022. <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/the-daily/id1200361736?i=1000579178903>.

³³³ Nicole Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

³³⁴ Verónica Zaragovia, "Trying to Avoid Racist Health Care, Black Women Seek Out Black Obstetricians," *NPR*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/05/28/996603360/trying-to-avoid-racist-health-care-black-women-seek-out-black-obstetricians>.

The overwhelming popularity of Dawson's content sets a precedent for what is popular on YouTube. Even though Dawson has since apologized for this content and taken the videos down, the effects of this overt racism remain. A colleague of Dawson's, Nappyheadedjojoba must contend with the antiblackness of her home platform.

The resistance strategies that Black social media users employ are sociotechnical. Black deviance can look like smartphone use in inappropriate spaces, transgressive naming practices, and hashtag circulation.³³⁵ Hashtag circulation in particular is a form of generative digital alchemy, "ways that women of color, Black women, and Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks in particular transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media that recode the failed scripts that negatively impact their lives."³³⁶ Hashtags can provide collective support for Black women, as well as resource sharing and a space to come together over shared creative vernacular. Neither YouTube nor Patreon use hashtags, so content creators on YouTube rely on other strategies of algorithmic visibility: namely eye-catching titles, keyword stuffing,³³⁷ and collaborations with other popular YouTubers.³³⁸ YouTube does have a tagging function, but it is obscured from public view. Content creators do at times incorporate visible tags that have nothing to do with their video in order to game the algorithm. Because Patreon is solely a subscription-based model, subscribers receive notifications on Patreon and via email when their creators post new content.

There are natural connections between Steele's theorization of digital Black feminism through the metaphor of the beauty shop and Nappyheadedjojoba's transgressive identity performance. Steele notes that the Black beauty shop makes space for women's and nonbinary

³³⁵ Brock.

³³⁶ Bailey, 24.

³³⁷ Bishop, 80.

³³⁸ Kelly Cotter, "Practical Knowledge of Algorithms: The Case Of BreadTube," *New Media & Society* (2022):12.

experiences of Blackness, when so much literature on racism is masculine. Additionally, the beauty shop is a complex metaphor: it is a space of resistance, yet simultaneously threads through hegemonic rituals of capitalism and entrepreneurship.³³⁹ It is an ambivalent space, much like beauty YouTube. Imbued in Nappyheadedjojoba's identity performance on YouTube and Patreon are the five tenets of digital Black feminism: agency, the right to self identify, gender nonbinary discourse, complicated allegiances, and dialectic of self and community interests. These tenets provide a framework for Nappyheadedjojoba's platform specific intimacy and will be explored in further detail throughout my analysis.

Nappyheadedjojoba's Resistance

On YouTube, Ti regularly juxtaposes makeup application with commentary about contemporary political issues and media scandals. Two regular series on her channel are "Ti Talks GRWM"—which focuses on overtly serious, politically consequential topics—and "Lukewarm Ti," in which Ti discusses more lighthearted topics like reality TV and famous media entertainers. Despite the seemingly apolitical nature of the latter series, it illustrates how Black women often use everyday, mundane conversation in digital spaces as political resistance. As stated by Steele, the claim that politically significant content must be legible as such to dominant groups "runs counter to our knowledge of how African American political communication has historically occurred in covert ways that keep this discourse hidden from the dominant group."³⁴⁰ While it is true that Nappyheadedjojoba's everyday content is political, hiding from the dominant group is not an option on YouTube, a platform that conflates visibility with success. Thus, creating beauty content is a strategic professional move, given its propensity for monetization and

³³⁹ Steele.

³⁴⁰ Catherine Knight Steele, "Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: the Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online," *Television & New Media* 19, no. 2 (2018): 113.

algorithmic recognition.³⁴¹ At the same time, this genre is seemingly at odds with critique aimed at white supremacy, capitalism, and the patriarchy, all of which the beauty community routinely embodies.

As Nappyheadedjoba creates a safe space of communal understanding for her Black viewers, she concurrently negotiates oppressive, hegemonic forces that may undermine her visibility online: the overtly commercialized beauty space that reifies dominant hierarchies and YouTube's algorithm, where normative performances of race, class, gender, and sexuality are rewarded via monetization and increased dissemination. As such, she is faced with a paradox in which she must assert the urgency of American antiblackness while *also* appealing to a predominantly white lifestyle audience. The beauty and lifestyle genres target viewers who are interested in makeup and accustomed to depoliticized, feminized cultural outputs.³⁴² Despite the fact that "Black women's beauty shops...paved the way for lifestyle entrepreneurs and the near ubiquity of today's influencer culture,"³⁴³ the digital beauty space is overwhelmingly white and aligns with neoliberal logics of personal responsibility and makeover regimes.³⁴⁴ The current conditions of YouTube's beauty community, then, do not lend themselves to radical content. Ti cannot assume the individual political investment of each of her viewers; nonetheless, she faces industrial conditions of rewarding white, neoliberal content with online visibility.

Negotiating Conditions of Precarity

Popular conceptualizations of YouTube content creators reflect notions of microcelebrity:

indeed, we hear stories of billionaire content creators making thousands of dollars from one post

³⁴¹ Sophie Bishop, "Managing Visibility on YouTube Through Algorithmic Gossip," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 11-12 (2019): 2601.

³⁴² Sophie Bishop, "Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 69-84.

³⁴³ Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 47.

³⁴⁴ Mary Retta, "Black Women YouTubers are Still Fighting to Be Heard on LeftTube," *Teen Vogue*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/black-women-youtubers-are-still-fighting-to-be-heard-on-lefttube>.

alone. We see imagery of luxurious evenings on the red carpet and screaming fans, desperate to get a mere few seconds with their favorite influencers. This popular imagery, in keeping with historical functions of celebrity, comes in part from the ideological function of the influencer. In times of economic uncertainty, the microcelebrity serves as an ideological reinforcer of consumption as identity expression and upward mobility as empowerment. Thus, what Dyer calls conspicuous consumption—visual representations of extreme wealth—serves as a model of normative cultural citizenship for social media users.³⁴⁵

The ideological function of the microcelebrity is at odds with the economic realities of most content creators. Marginalized content creators in particular very rarely make it to the cultural ranks of *influencer*. This dynamic speaks to the economic facet of the matrix of domination. Nappyheadedjojoba may work in the same digital space as Tati Westbrook and KathleenLights, but the conditions that she faces are distinctly precarious. As defined by Han, precarity is “the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract labor and a loss of state provisioning.”³⁴⁶ YouTube content creation is markedly unstable. Not only can a creator anticipate how many views they will receive on any given video, the amount of AdSense money they receive per view also changes. Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, creators reported receiving as little as a quarter of their usual earnings per view.³⁴⁷ In this case, creators don’t just live on a month to month basis; they live on a video to video basis. Ti’s discourse reflects these precarious conditions—in fact, her running allusion to “these YouTube streets” strikingly connotes struggle and working class positionality.³⁴⁸ As such, the tactics that she

³⁴⁵ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (1979).

³⁴⁶ Clara Han, “Precarity, Precariousness, and Vulnerability,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (2018): 331.

³⁴⁷ Jordan Beckwith in discussion with the author, February 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht7OGyuxP0s>.

³⁴⁸ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Divesting From the ‘Natural Hair Community’ Was GREAT for Me TBH.”

employs are not aligned with popular conceptualizations of influencer culture.

Nappyheadedjojoba may perform some recognizable elements of microcelebrity—however, YouTubers are also struggling entrepreneurs who may not have entire teams of support to promote their brands. As such, they must game the attention economy by not only engaging in visibility labor, but also by creating content and promoting themselves on multiple platforms.³⁴⁹ Given the impetus for content creators to engage in multi-platform promotion, we must consider how creators game the attention economy on specific platforms. Intimacy is a sought-after attribute across platforms, but the ways it is performed differ depending on the affordances and constraints of the platform in question.

So why is Patreon the other platform in question? One way that marginalized content creators respond to dominant platforms obscuring culturally subversive content is by utilizing crowdfunding platforms like Patreon. These platforms allow audiences to financially support their favorite content creators by donating a predetermined sum of money each month. In exchange, content creators offer perks for their audiences like exclusive content, livestreams, or video conferencing hangouts. Theorizing transformational feminism as a digital form of radical feminism, Glatt and Banet-Weiser observe that video bloggers whose feminist expressions are neither brand-safe, nor in line with neoliberal norms, will regularly post on Patreon in order to generate alternative income streams and (re)claim some agency over what they can and cannot post.³⁵⁰ This notion of agency calls upon Steele's theorization of Black Digital Feminism: while the word can invoke a neoliberal ethos of women's empowerment and individualism, this is a

³⁴⁹ Zoe Glatt, "'We're All Told Not to Put Our Eggs in One Basket': Uncertainty, Precarity and Cross-Platform Labor in the Online Video Influencer Industry," *International Journal of Communication* 16(2022): 3853-3871.

³⁵⁰ Zoe Glatt and Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Productive Ambivalence, Economies of Visibility, and the Political Potential of Feminist YouTubers," in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, eds. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 50.

distinctly white conceptualization of the term. Black women's agency online is a form of liberation from the constraints of white supremacy and patriarchy.³⁵¹ In other words, Black women's agency pushes against postfeminist choice discourse that circulates around social media. In the case of Nappyheadedjojoba's agency to post more freely on Patreon, she is not constrained by advertiser-friendly platforms that obscure the content of racialized Others.

Since Nappyheadedjojoba engages transformational feminism, I consider how she uses Patreon in her digital activism. This is a promising site that has been understudied in the context of marginalized creators. At the same time, few content creators can sustain a living off of crowdfunding platform alone and thus must engage visibility labor on algorithmically-driven platforms that follow an advertisement business model.³⁵² Thus, considering how Nappyheadedjojoba promotes social activism across platforms recognizes the precarious realities of digital content creation. Additionally, looking at Nappyheadedjojoba's social justice work in YouTube's beauty space illuminates how she hails *new* activists against antiblackness despite their privileged identity markers.

Specifically, I consider how Nappyheadedjojoba performs platform-specific-intimacy as part of her social justice labor. As previously stated, intimacy is integral to influencer success on both YouTube and Patreon. It is central to identity performance on YouTube, given the platform's preeminence as an early site of micro-celebrity. YouTube's original emphasis on amateur-produced content invokes a sense of transparency and authenticity with "sneak views into the home and everyday life of the vlogger, attuning the audience to the expectance of

³⁵¹ Steele, 70.

³⁵² Lee Hair, "Friends, Not ATMs: Parasocial Relational Work and the Construction of Intimacy by Artists on Patreon," *Sociological Spectrum* 41, no. 2 (2021): 197.

intimacy in content as well as style.”³⁵³ Since YouTube markets itself as a democratizing, open-access platform that resists gatekeeping commonly found in mainstream media, centering intimacy positions YouTube as a platform where you can hang out with and see the “true selves” of content creators. Similarly, generative work on Patreon necessitates relational labor, in which meaningful social ties occur in the context of economic exchange. Content creators on Patreon frame users’ financial contributions as a means of getting unbridled access to their lives. Thus, instead of directly paying for content, patrons pay for relationships.³⁵⁴

Intimacy Performance on YouTube

Intimacy is a central component of microcelebrity, given microcelebrity’s distinction from mainstream celebrity as more accessible with immediate access to a figure’s private, everyday life. Wrapped up in performances of intimacy are claims to authenticity, as the two qualities paired together suggest that viewers really know and/or are friends with their favorite creators.³⁵⁵ YouTube invites intimacy performance through “the spatial (evoking closeness), the temporal (evoking immediacy), the social (produced by patterns of direct address and self-revelation) and the medial (evinced by small-screen techniques such as cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing rhythms, etc.).”³⁵⁶ These discursive and visual claims to intimacy can generate audience loyalty, which may make them more likely to subscribe and return to the channel in question.

³⁵³ Tobias Raun, “Capitalizing Intimacy: New Subcultural Forms of Microcelebrity Strategies and Affective Labour on YouTube,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 105.

³⁵⁴ Hair, 202.

³⁵⁵ Tobias Raun, “Capitalizing Intimacy: New Subcultural Forms of Microcelebrity Strategies and Affective Labour on YouTube,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 99-113.

³⁵⁶ Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, “‘I Guess People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend’: The Role of Intimacy in the Celebrification of Beauty Vloggers,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 310.

Influencers can establish intimacy on YouTube in a few ways. First, their presentational style is self-disclosing. They will talk about current struggles or share private experiences. Oftentimes, this content will be featured in private, domestic spaces such as the bedroom. In addition to the intimate style YouTuber creators engage, the architecture of YouTube also invites—and even demands—that creators acknowledge and respond to their viewers in the comments section. Increasingly, YouTube influencers must cross-promote on other platforms, which furthers opportunity and expectations that creators will respond to fans on comments and direct messages.³⁵⁷

Intimacy is such a valuable commodity on YouTube because it is a form of social capital.³⁵⁸ Defined as “institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group,”³⁵⁹ social capital is a form of building social ties to connect to one’s social strata. The opportunities one receives may be due to the relationships and institutional connections in their sphere. No matter the site, social capital exchanges occur through “performances of connection.”³⁶⁰ Putnam posits two kinds of social capital: bonding—in which community members connect over shared resources and interests—and bridging—in which weak tie connections are strengthened through connections via a shared space (like a coffee shop or a bowling alley). Interestingly, beauty YouTube simultaneously presents both kinds of social capital. Subscribers and content creators can bond over their shared community (indeed, many beauty YouTubers refer to their subscribers as family), yet the recommendations

³⁵⁷ Raun, 105.

³⁵⁸ Amy Dobson et al, “Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media: Towards Theorising Public Lives on Private Platforms,” *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*, eds. Amy Dobson et al (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3-29.

³⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

³⁶⁰ Alex Lambert, “Intimacy and Social Capital on Facebook: Beyond the Psychological Perspective,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 11 (2016): 2566.

feature on YouTube allows bridging to occur: viewers can connect with other users and new content creators through new, algorithmically recommended content. In the age of digital media, what Lambert calls intimacy capital is a mediated form of social capital. Here, possessing both the technical skills and cultural fluency in platform conventions both result in more followers, or “friends” on social media platforms. Knowing how to appropriately manage the lines of public intimacy performance on social media is rewarded online. For instance, posting a “happy birthday” message for a friend—while tagging them, so they can repost it—Instagram story is a ubiquitously accepted form of public intimacy performance. Posting daily expressions of gratitude on a significant other’s Facebook timeline is a violation of public intimacy performance. While the term intimacy capital originally centers around Facebook, it is applicable to YouTube, given its focus on public intimacy performance. Not only must beauty YouTubers perform intimacy, but they must do so using recognizable community vernacular. There are material consequences to performing (or failing to perform) intimacy. As influencers cultivate intimacy with their viewers, they gain potential subscribers. While subscriptions do not directly pay influencers, a higher subscriber count often results in more views. Additionally, sponsorship deal figures are negotiated based on metrics of creator popularity.

To gain visibility on YouTube, Ti must perform intimacy. This is a normative strategy in gaming the algorithm and is, at face value, not particularly politically resistive. However, the ways that Nappyheadedjojoba employs intimacy activate a politically negligent audience. In other words, her intimacy practices disarm a largely white audience before she implicates them for their roles in reification of white supremacy. Specifically, she uses makeup as incongruity, familiarizes politics through beauty-specific language, engages respectability politics, and uses

marketing as relational labor. These tactics all promote intimacy-as-urgency, thus calling upon her audience to do something about the oppressive power structures that they may benefit from.

Incongruous Use of Makeup

Nappyheadedjojoba uses references to makeup as a form of perspective by incongruity; yet instead of using this incongruity to create tension, Nappyheadedjojoba uses it to relieve tension. Perspective by incongruity, a Burkean framing of irony, is a common feminist rhetorical tactic that “bring[s] together opposites, without resolving the tension that exists between them,” thereby allowing audiences to hold competing ideas.”³⁶¹ Perspective by incongruity reveals limitations in dominant lenses, thus offering new ways of seeing the world, primarily through cognitive dissonance. In many cases, this perspective by incongruity creates tensions that feminist content creators refuse to resolve. However, as is the case with Nappyheadedjojoba, an understudied purpose of perspective by incongruity can be its intimacy-building function.

Barring the countercultural makeup looks that she produces, Nappyheadedjojoba’s GRWM videos visually and architecturally align with dominant norms in the beauty community’s getting-ready videos. She is in a domestic space and she engages all of the expected cosmetic application steps fluidly and masterfully. She links all of the products that she used in the description box, thus employing algorithmically recognizable visibility labor. Discursively, however, Nappyheadedjojoba’s recent GRWM videos do not center makeup. She rarely verbally refers to product techniques or brand names—as such, it is jarring when she stops talking about murder of Black bodies and references a new eyeshadow palette.

³⁶¹ Meg Tully, “‘Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Don’t Rape’: Subverting Postfeminist Logics on *Inside Amy Schumer*, *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 4 (2017): 343.

Illustrative of this tactic is in Nappyheadejojoba's 2021 video titled "Is This What 'Build Back Better' Looks Like?|Ti Talks/Rants about Amazon GRWM." When talking about how little political activism her audience is willing to undertake, Ti states:

Some of y'all know I'm pretty active on Instagram, particularly stories every day, to help share information. But I don't even see what I guess I'd call accessible resistance being utilized very much like boycotts and local organizing. Doing the bare minimum to resist is for many, apparently too much. Again, I actually have these data...because I share a lot of things like petitions and social justice tool kits, phone scripts. And when you add a swipe up link to anything, whether it's a petition, whatever, if it's a swipe up link on Instagram, the person posting it can see how many people actually swiped up. And I just shared one the other day where it was for a pre-addressed, pre-written email petition to fill out. Takes less than 60 seconds to do it, and I said as much in my story. By the way, I'm using my friend Mel Thompson's Tiny Marvels palette because spring is just around the corner and this palette just screams springtime to me. Of course you can use it whenever, like it's a very versatile palette, just look at it. Super verse. But, yeah. I feel like this is what I want to wear on a nice approaching spring day. Anyway...I shared a swipe up link on my stories...if I was sharing it, obviously I felt it was for an extremely worthy initiative, a worthy effort, and I imagine the people who fuck with me heavy enough to watch my goddamn Instagram stories must care about what I think is important, right? Why else would you be watching my stories? I get on average somewhere in the range of like 700 to 1000 people looking at a typical story frame that I'll post, right? Not an impressive amount, but you know, there's some folks up in there on a regular basis...you want to guess how many people actually swiped up on that, again, super quick...actually stopping gentrification social justice kind of situation? 25.³⁶²

Nappyheadedjojoba establishes tension here due to her explicit calling out of her audience for not practicing bare-minimum activism. Engaging in something of her own platform critique, Ti highlights the affordances that Instagram has which offer potential for social justice work, and then comments on the disparities between these affordances and the lived realities of user practice. In this excerpt, Ti plainly tells her audience that they are not doing enough and that they need to do better. This exchange starts to disrupt a sense of intimacy between Ti and her audience, given her explicit chastising. While this may result in audiences clicking away out of defensiveness, Ti is then quick to draw attention to a favorite springtime makeup look. She

³⁶² Nappyheadedjojoba, "Is This What 'Build Back Better' Looks Like?|Ti Talks/Rants About Amazon GRWM," YouTube, March 8, 2021, video, 13:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmWbCIEKz4>.

reinforces this sudden emphasis on makeup, noting, “by the way, I’ve now dipped into this Pat McGrath. I forgot what this is called, but I’ll link it. It’s from her holiday collection.”³⁶³ These incongruous references to makeup invite Ti’s audience to stop reflecting on their personal activist negligence and instead look outwards on something that is, quite literally, shiny. Thus, these incongruous remarks draw a defensive audience back in, thus repairing damage to relational labor that occurred prior.

Ti’s incongruous references to makeup also serve an industrial function. Ti utilizes vocabulary that aligns with capitalist, neoliberal critique, thus threatening invisibility. References to a “springtime” makeup look and a “holiday collection” also serve a repair function, as they mitigate obscuring potential with what Bishop calls “keyword stuffing.”³⁶⁴ Seasonal language typically attracts visibility on YouTube beauty videos, given its close ties with consumption. As new seasons emerge, new collections launch, thus encouraging consumers to purchase the most relevant trends du jour. Seasonal videos are key sites where beauty YouTube and the cosmetics industry collide—both capitalize on the pressure for consumers to keep up.³⁶⁵ YouTube users are compelled to keep up with the latest trends by watching seasonal hauls and tutorials; concurrently, they are then conditioned to purchase the products they see linked in the video’s description box. In the case of new launches, the beauty guru acts as an intermediary between viewer (consumer) and brand (advertiser). Beauty gurus may incentivize purchases by providing affiliate codes and product links. Nappyheadedjojoba’s incongruous form of intimacy—seasonal language—then, has multiple functions: it keeps audiences connected to her content by

³⁶³ Nappyheadedjojoba, “‘Is This What ‘Build Back Better’ Looks Like?’”

³⁶⁴ Sophie Bishop, “Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization”: 80.

³⁶⁵ Bishop, “Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization,” 80.

employing visibility labor, yet also works to relieve potential defensiveness and tension among her viewers.

Beauty Work as Politically Central

To familiarize political critique for her audience, Ti incorporates beauty-specific vocabulary and references. Unlike incongruous references to makeup as theorized above, Ti uses these cosmetic references to push forward a politicized message—in other words, her beauty work is central to her politics. In this way, Ti establishes herself as a member of YouTube’s beauty community of practice by engaging insider vocabulary. These rhetorical practices promote viewer trust because she is “one of them.” Gannon and Prothero contend that communities of practice are informed by “talking, producing, helping or participating generally...imagining a sense of community... [or] alignment: the mutual process by which participants engage in ways that are broadly in keeping with general community practices.”³⁶⁶ Communities of practice establish an everyday vernacular that constitutes group values and standards, cultivating paths to success within that community through tacit assumptions and explicit articulations of expectations and norms. Participants use particular vocabularies in communities of practice to establish their legitimacy and further their ethos within those spaces. They can also establish insider positions by performing tacit cosmetics-related knowledge. By positioning herself as a member of the community, Ti can then use the community’s values to demonstrate why political engagement is essential, even (and especially) for those in privileged positions.

Nappyheadedjojoba’s most explicit link between political activism and beauty work is in her 2020 video titled “Parasocialism, Part 2. (Or, ‘How I Learned to Stop Worrying When Our Ex-Faves Bomb.’)” Here, she connects parasocial relationships developed between fans and

³⁶⁶ Valerie Gannon and Andrea Prothero, “Beauty Bloggers and YouTubers as a Community of Practice,” *Journal of Marketing Management* 34, nos. 7-8 (2018): 594.

YouTube influencers with socialism. This video is a different kind of “GRWM,” as it is a sponsored skin care video that focuses on a clay mask that she applies while chatting. She references the “slay a day in May” challenge that she is doing on her Instagram, further reinforcing cross promotion practices that occur in the beauty community.³⁶⁷ She notes that makeup application should always begin with skin care, thus establishing the sponsorship’s relevance to the beauty community. Her tacit knowledge of the kinds of skin care that work best with certain makeup is made clear as she states:

I don’t always do a mask when I’m prepping my skin for makeup, but I have been noticing that I needed to powder certain areas of my face a bit more for when I’m photographing these various looks that I’m doing over on my IG in the past week or so. So a clay mask is definitely in order because the clay will help draw out some of that excess that’s lurking in the areas of my face.³⁶⁸

References to powdering imply insider knowledge, particularly as she notes powdering in specific contexts. Furthermore, there is clear assumptive platform-based knowledge, as she shortens “Instagram” to “IG,” further using digital vernacular to position herself as fluent in digital beauty communities of practice.

Nappyheadedjojoba continues to promote identification between socialist activism and beauty work. She starts by giving a clear definition of socialism. She then connects a broad definition of socialism to viewing practices and preferences among the beauty community’s viewership. Observing that mid and small-tier beauty gurus tend to accrue more views per video than larger YouTube “stars,” Nappyheadedjojoba states, “these [big] channels that have become YouTube rich, many of them, as a result, have become completely out of touch and unrelatable.”³⁶⁹ The word “unrelatable” is poignant here, as it violates a platform norm of

³⁶⁷ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Parasocialism, Part 2. (Or, ‘How I Learned to Stop Worrying When Our Ex-Faves Bomb,’)” YouTube, May 13, 2020, 19:32, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6dhrMzQAAQ&t=73s>.

³⁶⁸ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Parasocialism, Part 2.”

³⁶⁹ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Parasocialism, Part 2.”

authenticity (see ch 1). Thus, when using this word, Nappyheadedjojoba codes her language in community violations that warrant lack of viewer support.

Nappyheadedjojoba goes on to connect this “unrelatable” identity performance to examples that are specific to beauty videos: “almost exclusively, I see lazy, stale, and dated content from the top tier channels. Before I did another purge of my subscriptions recently, I remember legit seeing videos with titles like ‘soft glam makeup for Valentine’s Day.’ In 2020. That ain’t it. We are past that point, y’all.”³⁷⁰ Someone outside of the beauty community would not know that a “soft glam Valentine’s Day” tutorial was outdated, thus solidifying Nappyheadedjojoba’s direct address to viewers in the beauty world. She uses this discussion of “tired” content to contextualize the actions that viewers are taking and subsequently engages expressly socialist language: “we like to feel like we are part of something—in this case, a counterculture to the millionaire influencer who’s in the YouTube 1%....There is an uprising of sorts taking place. An uprising against the YouTube influencer 1% by the YouTube proletariat.”³⁷¹ Just as being unrelatable is a violation of beauty community norms, references to “the 1%” invoke a political elite class that does not have everyday citizens’ interests at heart. The serious stakes of the 1%’s lack of commitment to working class issues are established. The ties between popular beauty gurus and the ruling class are typically obscured, which makes it easy to write off out-of-touch influencers as unserious, or even comedic. Challenging this assumption that multi-millionaire beauty gurus are politically unthreatening, Nappyheadedjojoba discursively creates a direct connection between exploitation, class, and beauty YouTube. In other words, she illuminates the ways in which beauty gurus’ audiences are already in politicized

³⁷⁰ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Parasocialism, Part 2.”

³⁷¹ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Parasocialism, Part 2.”

spaces, whether they recognize it or not. Thus, the exigence to act politically becomes heightened, as their communities and entertainment interests are affected by class politics.

Similarly, referencing the “YouTube proletariat” invokes Marxist thought. As Nappyheadedjojoba notes that this kind of uprising is already occurring in YouTube politics, she sets a precedent for political activism in the beauty community. Lastly, Nappyheadedjojoba articulates the socialist nature of the preference for smaller YouTubers, stating, “we as viewers are overwhelmingly only watching the channels who we feel are real, those who we feel are like us, and give voice to our thoughts and feelings, especially if we don’t necessarily make videos of our own. This goes back to that socialism aspect, having ownership in the YouTuber.”³⁷² Nappyheadedjojoba articulates the power of viewing practices, noting the influence they have on YouTuber success. In doing so, she identifies the power of solidarity in collectively choosing not to support wealthy influencers. Thus, she positions the move towards her imagined future that eradicates hierarchies as not so far out of reach for the beauty community, as she establishes a connection between them and socialist activists.

Ti continues to link beauty work and socialist politics in her 2021 video titled “Patrisse Cullors and this \$1.4 Million ‘Mansion’ Has a Lot of Folks Turnt Up Right Now,” in which she challenges preconceived notions of socialism somehow being antithetical to luxury. By framing herself as “bougie” and enticed by beautiful accessories and cosmetics, Ti aligns herself with the consumerist values implicit in the beauty community. In fact, by stating that “people are so hung up on the fact that Marxism equals everyone in gray jumpsuits eating soylent green,” Ti resists the urge to see socialism and product consumption as mutually exclusive.³⁷³ It is not

³⁷² Nappyheadedjojoba, “Parasocialism, Part 2.”

³⁷³ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Patrisse Cullors and This \$1.4 Million ‘Mansion’ Has a Lot of Folks Turnt Up Right Now...[Ti Talks GRWM,” YouTube, April 17, 2021, video, 20:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Fj5YhPFCOU>.

consumption that Ti takes issue with—it's capitalism. Throughout the video, Ti simultaneously refutes criticisms that Patrisse Cullors—a cofounder of the BLM organization—is hypocritical by buying a nice house and reframes the beauty community as a space of political potential.

Ti does not often practice self-disclosure on YouTube, so when she does, the intimate function of this strategy is especially evident. Here, Ti self-discloses as “bougie,” noting,

Some people can do two things. I would love to do these exact two things. If I could buy a beautiful house to live in, I would. That doesn't mean I'm going to stop believing in human rights or in fighting for those rights or in participating in mutual aid. Give me all the nice things, but in a society without racism and exploitation... I'll confess that I think of myself as I guess a bougie anarchist. There's probably a couple folks out there freaking out because I said anarchist and they think that means utter chaos, which it does not...I want to destroy hierarchies, as in, all hierarchies, but in the world that comes after, I want to wear all of the obnoxious rings and gorgeous handmade garments and flit about my house with a garden and a view.³⁷⁴

Ti's use of the word “confess” plays an explicitly intimate role, as “confessional culture” is a contemporary norm for women influencers to connect with their audiences.³⁷⁵ However, standard use of confessional YouTube videos includes breakdown vlogs, tears, and emphasis on individual psychology. In Ti's case, she uses confession to discuss collective identity, thus turning a platform call to self-disclose on its head. She states something personal about herself, yet at the same time, uses that information to spark interest in what it means to be a “bougie anarchist.”

In the same breath that Ti reveals something personal about herself, she also alludes to normative lifestyle content. By discussing the kind of life she wants to live, Ti utilizes vocabulary that is recognizable to a lifestyle audience. Beautiful domestic spaces and accessories are common in the beauty space, especially with its recent embrace of vlog-style

³⁷⁴ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Patrisse Cullors and This \$1.4 Million ‘Mansion’ Has a Lot of Folks Turnt Up Right Now.”

³⁷⁵ Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, “Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, Self-Exposure and the Productivity of Negative Affect,” *Convergence: International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 86.

“lifestreaming.”³⁷⁶ Extravagant clothing and accessories are visual markers of beauty influencers, thus making Ti culturally aligned with beauty content. She, like her viewers who are interested in beauty, has appearance-related aspirations. Ti can use this appeal to commonality to later call for direct change in the beauty community: halting “Amazon favorites” videos.³⁷⁷ By establishing that she is not calling for *no* consumption and is instead advocating for *ethical* consumption, Ti makes clear the possibility of a world with nice things, equal distribution of resources, and humane treatment of workers.

Ti’s juxtaposition of politically charged language with beauty community vocabulary does not undermine the seriousness of political engagement. Instead, it makes deeply complex exigencies digestible to an audience who may deem themselves apolitical. By articulating how beauty community members are already political, Ti makes the next steps of political activism more accessible to her viewers. Thus, in addition to making herself legible as a beauty community member, Ti also makes beauty community members legible as impactful activists.

Lastly, Ti uses cosmetic play as a survival mechanism. As Black women are urged to use makeup to “successfully” engage respectability and class mobility, they may also use makeup as a distraction and escape from systemic oppression.³⁷⁸ When discussing makeup products that “piss her off,” Ti introduces products that are unoriginal, don’t perform well, or are uninspired. She references a fail from beloved brand Charlotte Tilbury. Citing her surprise at the product’s flop, Ti states, “Charlotte Tilbury is one of my favorite brands. LARPING as a wealthy white woman is how I transmute my rage.”³⁷⁹ Charlotte Tilbury is a staple in the beauty community, so

³⁷⁶ Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, & Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 207.

³⁷⁷ Nappyheadedjojoba, “Is This What ‘Build Back Better’ Looks Like?”

³⁷⁸ Ana Elias et al, “Aesthetic Labour: Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism,” in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, 2017: 12.

³⁷⁹ Nappyheadedjojoba, “For Real? This Makeup Pi\$\$es Me off, YouTube, December 31, 2021, video, 10:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NfDidvSuZE>.

referencing the company solidifies Ti's position as a beauty expert. She has a shared love of a brand with her viewers, thus establishing a point of connection. While using the same products as wealthy white women may read as assimilation, drawing on Steele, I argue that "LARPING as a wealthy white woman" invokes the right to self identify. Steele notes that digital branding conditions all social media users to think about their public presentations; this is not a new phenomenon for Black women. Indeed, Black women have always had to think about how their self-presentation could be deemed threatening or deviant.³⁸⁰ When mediated representations of Black women reinforce hegemonic notions of the "Other," using play to present oneself as economically powerful (wealthy) and culturally dominant (white) is a form of deviance.

At the same time, Ti's comment counters the assumption that cosmetics are accessible to everyone and are forms of free expression—both due to financial disparities and identity politics. Interestingly, Ti can explicitly name who the beauty community is for (a category she is excluded from) without undermining her own place in that space. By referencing her use of Charlotte Tilbury's products as "live action role play," Ti notes that she does have access to high end beauty products—but they are widely inaccessible to people who are not wealthy or white. This seemingly off-hand remark explicitly politicizes the beauty community by centering its reinforcement of systemic oppression based on race and class.

Respectability

One facet of Black Cyberculture is "respectability," in which Black folks perform whiteness as moral and exemplary for "Blacks who should be 'respectable' and whites who needed to be shown that Blacks could be respectable."³⁸¹ DuBois's theory of "double consciousness," or the

³⁸⁰ Steele, 72.

³⁸¹ Brock, 173.

opposing lenses through which Black folks see themselves informs the impetus for Black communities to engage in respectability politics.³⁸² In viewing their Blackness through a white lens—seeing Black communities as low class, unprofessional, and *ratchet*, Black folks are compelled to perform respectability for two audiences: “African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and White people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable.”³⁸³ Notably, respectability politics incorporate both raced and classed discourse, as performing Black respectability obscures the systemic obstacles that maintain Black subjugation through low-waged work.³⁸⁴ Brock argues that respectability politics are performed through external markers such as cultural outputs, dress, and speech. These expressions are policed both within and outside of Black communities to ensure maintenance of dominant economic and political hierarchies. For the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on Nappyheadedjojoba’s use of speech as a negotiation of Black respectability.

Ti has formally addressed accusations that she “talks white” in a 2019 GRWM video titled “The ‘Way I Talk.’” She routinely gets comments on her YouTube videos about the sophisticated way she talks. As a response, Ti discusses her privileged childhood in which her parents went through potentially illegal hoops to enroll her in the best public schools, which would later grant other professional opportunities. Because she was in predominantly white institutions, Ti had to code switch in order to survive. Explicitly addressing respectability politics, Ti notes, “when you’re in these kinds of very very very white spaces, you find yourself, whether you’re aware of it or not, whether you want to or not, behaving in ways so that you are

³⁸² W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

³⁸³ Mikaela Pitcan et al, “Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23(2018): 165.

³⁸⁴ Nikki Lane, *The Black Queer Work of Ratchet: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the (Anti)Politics of Respectability* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

seen as ‘one of the good Blacks.’”³⁸⁵ In other words, even once she has been admitted into privileged spaces, she still has to prove that she belongs there. As it stands, linguistic cues and “code switching” were primary tactics that Ti employed to signify belonging.

On YouTube, Ti mirrors the very same linguistic signifiers of whiteness that she critiques. This suggests that Ti views YouTube as a predominantly white space that demands performance of whiteness in order to succeed. Ti makes known to her viewers that she can speak their language and perform whiteness, thus invoking politicized claims to intimacy. Here, she implicitly argues about the price she must pay to cultivate that intimacy with her audience: she must linguistically erase evidence of her Blackness to be recognized both by YouTube and its individual viewers. Through this tactic, Ti sheds to light the continued relevance of respectability politics. Performing whiteness is something that her YouTube viewers expect—even if subconsciously, as whiteness is coded as neutral.

Ti’s performance of respectability suggests something about her own double consciousness. Ti articulates understanding that in order to succeed in white spaces, she must obscure a part of her identity that her white counterparts see as Other. The same logics apply in mediated spaces. Since YouTube is a white-dominant space, Ti uses discursive strategies to convey her educated, relatively privileged background. In other words, she uses her knowledge about her YouTube audience base to perform a curated self. While to some, this practice violates YouTube’s requisite authenticity, Ti notes, “I can only speak for myself, but at all times, however I’m expressing myself, whether it’s MLA or AAVE, it is authentic to me and my identity. It’s just different facets of me, of my mind, the way that I think, and then communicate

³⁸⁵ Nappyheadedjojoba, “The ‘Way I Talk.’|Ti Talks GRWM,” YouTube, November 15, 2019, video, 21:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4Wy8O07_WM&t=881s.

ideas.”³⁸⁶ This distinction suggests that Ti’s authenticity remains intact, yet it disrupts YouTube’s history of depoliticizing authenticity. Here, Ti draws attention to the fact that her performances of authenticity are contextual and informed by structural factors such as socioeconomic class and dominant conceptualizations of American Blackness. In other words, Ti speaks to her largely white YouTube audience authentically, but in ways that demonstrate awareness of larger power structures at play.

Marketing as Relational Labor

A common theme in Nappyheadedjojoba’s “GRWM” videos is her references to what she is getting ready for: Patreon events. Almost exclusively, Ti films this genre when she has a pressing reason to get ready. As such, she notes getting ready for Zoom parties, livestreams, and movie nights with her patrons. Accordingly, she links the URL to her Patreon account in the description box, in addition to her Instagram.

This strategy is, quite plainly, a marketing technique. Ti uses her YouTube channel to promote a platform where she is more active and more creatively liberated. Since a higher percentage of profit goes to Patreon creators, this marketing move is sensible, especially in response to YouTube’s unreliable and evolving algorithm. Thus, Ti frames audience support via the attention economy as a pathway to direct financial support on Patreon. While this strategy is straightforward at first glance, it is important to consider how Nappyheadedjojoba discursively frames her “Patreon fam” in relation to digital intimacy practice. Doing so invites scholarly attention to platform-specific intimacy. Since both YouTube (which is free to users) and Patreon

³⁸⁶ Nappyheadedjojoba, “The Way I Talk.”

(which is not) center intimacy performance, content creators are faced with a challenge of establishing Patreon as inherently more intimate than other platforms.

There is a temporal element to Ti's references to Patreon, which frame her "Patreon fam" as taking precedence. One reason that Ti films "GRWM" videos is because she is already getting ready for a scheduled event, in which case, she might as well turn on her camera. One particularly evident example of this is in "Is This What 'Build Back Better' Looks Like?," in which Ti introduces the video stating, "I'm getting ready for a Zoom party with my Patreon family, so I figured I'd just squeeze in a quick rant."³⁸⁷ The phrase "squeeze in," is notable here, as it suggests an alternative to the standard planning, time, and care that is routinely expected of YouTube creators. Instead, YouTube content is framed as an aside, or a supplemental platform. In this case, Ti does not cultivate intimacy with her YouTube audience; rather, she invites them to be part of the platform where the actual intimacy takes place.

Wrapped up in temporal framings of intimacy are claims to authenticity. In the Patrisse Cullors video, Ti notes that she was not originally planning on making a YouTube video on the subject because "I already talked about this on my Patreon, so I more or less said my piece days ago. But I got a little time before my next meeting and I gotta get ready, so, let's run."³⁸⁸ This explanation frames Patreon subscribers as getting Ti's freshest, most candid opinion on a current event, while YouTube presents a mere copy of her authentic response. This remark also presents the possibility that Ti's YouTube viewers are missing other important "Ti Talks" that are exclusive to Patreon. Here, then, authenticity and intimacy are linked through claims to originality and exclusivity.

³⁸⁷ Nappyheadedjojoba, "Is This What 'Build Back Better' Looks Like?"

³⁸⁸ Nappyheadedjojoba, "Patrisse Cullors and This \$1.4 Million 'Mansion' Has a Lot of Folks Turnt Up Right Now."

Intimacy Performance on Patreon

The primary draw of Patreon subscriptions is its access to relationships. As noted by Lee Hair, “artists obscure the impersonal and economic nature of the platform by framing subscriptions as social support between two intimate parties, which appeals to fans and protects artists from the cultural proscription against the commercialization of art. Second, artists reinforce this social support framework by compensating their fans with socially intimate rewards.”³⁸⁹ While many creators on Patreon use this supplemental income to fund their creative work, the focus is on the relationships that Patreon support can foster. In essence, Patreon creators sell friendships that are more direct and attentive than parasocial work on dominant platforms.

Common forms of intimacy-building on Patreon are self-disclosure, liveness, and originality.³⁹⁰ Patreon creators may disclose something about themselves that their non-paying audience is unaware of. Furthermore, they may offer more immediate access to themselves and their lives through livestreams. Originality is common for visual artists, as they may send patrons an original piece of art in exchange for their monthly donation. Following Baym’s argument that temporal structures of media matter³⁹¹, I argue that the immediacy of Patreon content cultivates a sense of intimacy between a content creator and their fans. For instance, from my own experience, when a creator releases a video to their Patreon community before their YouTube community, recipients will receive emails that say “you got early access!.” Following this subject header is a banner that tells you how many days earlier the patron got access than their YouTube counterparts. This dynamic suggests that Patreon sells intimacy not only in its liveness and originality, but highlights the relative intimacy that Patreon subscribers get compared to

³⁸⁹ Hair, 197.

³⁹⁰ Hair, 207.

³⁹¹ Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 8.

YouTube audiences. Thus, while Patreon is, in theory, a competitor to YouTube, it also relies on its temporal structure to lay claim to *increased* intimacy.



Figure 6

Architecturally, Patreon invites sustained, long-term relationships. This in part comes from the subscription model. Patrons subscribe to a certain subscription tier, each of which can range from \$1 to \$500 a month. This predetermined sum of money is billed to the patron each month; the patron must manually unsubscribe to the Patreon page if they no longer want to financially support that creator. This dynamic constitutes the act of unsubscribing as a deliberate message, rather than a simple “decluttering” that can happen on YouTube. One function on Patreon is the “poll,” where patrons can vote on future Patreon/YouTube videos. This interactivity also sets up long-term relationships, as audiences are made to feel like they have an active role in the creator’s content. Lastly, the tier system invites categorizations of intimacy. Ti’s Patreon is divided into three tiers: the \$1 a month tier is the “remonetizers,” the \$5 a month tier is the “notification squad,” and the \$10 a month tier is the “ride or dies.” Fans who want to establish their closeness to Ti, then, are incentivized to join the “ride or die” tier, given its rhetorics of closeness.

Importantly, Patreon’s lack of recommendation feature suggests that the platform relies on existing knowledge of creators. The “find creators” tab is a minimalist page with a search bar and categories of popular searches. Creators are not featured on the home page. These constraints indicate that Ti’s Patreon subscribers already know her from YouTube. That being said, Ti’s distinct discursive strategies on Patreon suggest that she sees her Patreon subscribers as different

from her YouTube audience. On Patreon, Ti imagines her audiences as already politically activated and as members of several shared insider groups: beauty aficionado, political activist, and AAVE-recognizer. Because her patrons are assumed to share these identity markers, Ti foregoes intimacy-as-urgency in favor of intimacy-as-reward. Specifically, she does this by framing her patrons' support as creatively liberating, by disclosing her personal relationship with political dynamics, and by engaging ratchetry as resistance.

Creative Liberty

Ti violates generic social media entertainment conventions and presupposed expectations of her content on Patreon. This tactic frames Patreon as a place where Ti can be unrestricted and take creative risks. YouTubers are encouraged to find their “niche,” and are subsequently limited to those genres. If a YouTuber ventures outside of their recognizable self-brand, they are disciplined by the algorithm. In the past two years, Ti has branded herself on content that spans both makeup and political commentary—as such, her solely makeup-related videos do not generate much visibility. The “Ti Talks GRWM” genre takes significant time, resources, and emotional bandwidth to sustain research into systemic white supremacy. Ti does not get a reprieve without consequence—the attention economy demands that Ti continue producing emotionally taxing content.

This same dynamic does not hold true on Patreon: with the assumption that patrons are already interested in what she is doing, Ti frames her Patreon as a space of creative liberty where she can move outside of the constraints of her (limited) self brand. Furthermore, Ti seemingly imagines her audience as already politically activated, thus reducing the need for political

urgency. As such, she can focus on solely cosmetics related content. She frames her Patreon as a space of reprieve and escape from the demands of advertiser-based social media work. When introducing “Shit [she’s] Loving Right Now,” Ti states, “it’s nice to feel like I can do videos like this. I get jealous of the girlies who are ‘allowed’ to do this on YouTube, but they would seriously tank my channel. But I can do them here because y’all are my real ones.”³⁹² Here, Ti explicitly links creative freedom with audience support. For one, she creatively subverts the “monthly favorites” video into a title that is not algorithmically recognizable. Additionally, she assumes her Patreon supporters to be interested in anything she posts, which is evidenced by their financial investment. Thus, the financial contribution has an affective element to it. Rather than simply share exclusive content that aligns with her self-brand on YouTube, Ti notes that because her patrons are her “real ones,” they get access to a different side of her that YouTube would discipline.

One of the reasons that creator self-disciplining is so pervasive on YouTube, yet less common on Patreon is the platforms’ respective monetization structures. Since YouTube monetization relies on advertiser buy-in, YouTube’s creator guidelines focus on what does and does not constitute advertiser-friendly content. However, Kopf argues that the language in these guidelines is vague and ambiguous. This ambiguity is seemingly intentional, as it does not implicate YouTube in demonetizing content. Indeed, focusing on suitability for advertisers “evokes the impression that the advertising brands themselves review content for advertiser friendliness,”³⁹³ and does not threaten the position of platforms as neutral, apolitical

³⁹² Nappyheadedjojoba, “Shit I’m Loving Right Now, March 2022,” Patreon, March 12, 2022, video, 24:35, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/shit-im-loving-63729310>.

³⁹³ Susanne Kopf, “Corporate Censorship Online: Vagueness and Discursive Imprecision in YouTube’s Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines,” *New Media & Society* (2022): 8.

intermediaries.³⁹⁴ Thus, hedging language in YouTube's creator guidelines conditions creators to self-discipline and produce normative content in the hopes of being monetized. On the other hand, Patreon's monetization structure does not rely on advertiser interest. While creators still have to follow Patreon's community guidelines, these guidelines contain far less ambiguous guidelines than YouTube. As such, the self-discipline that creators must employ on YouTube are informed by industrial constraints; those same constraints are not present on Patreon.

In a similar vein, Ti uses Patreon to engage meta-critique about the restricting conventions of self-promotion on YouTube. In the introduction of the same video, Ti states:

This is a little shit I'm loving right now, which is my version of favorites. As content creators, I feel like sometimes we try a little bit too hard to 'brand things' for ourselves that are pretty familiar concepts. Some of the most cringe worthy for me are the 'will I buy it?' iterations that I've seen because people really just be doing too much. Some of the most graceless, poorly written, trying to be unique but not working out in your favor type of titles to simply say, 'here's some makeup that's coming out, maybe I'll buy it, maybe I won't.'³⁹⁵

This critique is not simply about individual influencers in YouTube's beauty community. Ti presents an industrial critique in revealing the unwritten rules about self-branding on the platform. While authenticity is a prized commodity on advertiser-based social media platforms, the way that authenticity is performed is highly controlled and edited, which limits creative innovation.³⁹⁶ In keeping with Ti's above observation, central to digital performance of authenticity is consistency with a self brand, which contributes to audience belief that they truly know the creator behind the camera. With that dynamic, however, creators who perform selves outside of that recognizable brand are too unwieldy and unpredictable for the social media landscape.

³⁹⁴ Tarleton Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms,'" *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 347-364.

³⁹⁵ Nappyheadedjojoba, "Shit I'm Loving Right Now, March 2022."

³⁹⁶ Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, & Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 246.

Because Ti is able to perform different facets of herself on Patreon, she presents layers of complexity in authenticity. Invoking Goffman's frontstage and backstage self, Ti illuminates the "frontstage" performance that dominates YouTube.³⁹⁷ She then uses that seeming exposure to make claims to a backstage self on Patreon. Here, Ti presents herself as someone who genuinely enjoys makeup for the fun of it, rather than as a means of forwarding a political critique. Ironically, this messaging is a political critique of for-profit platforms' limiting constraints on identity expression. This expanded repertoire of authenticity performance comes in part from the departure from reliance on algorithmic recommendation systems.

Individual Relationship with Politics

Ti largely limits individual self-disclosure to her Patreon, thus solidifying claims to increased authenticity and intimacy on the platform. It is important to consider the kinds of self disclosure that Ti engages to promote this sense of intimacy, since self-disclosure is an integral claim to intimacy online. Most evident is Ti's disclosure of her individual relationship with politics. Rather than focus on critiques of oppressive systems that targets an ignorant audience, Ti's discourse on Patreon assumes subscriber baseline knowledge of the issues she references. Thus, Ti constitutes her Patrons as insider members of two groups: the beauty community and political activists. With that assumed knowledge, Ti then discusses her individual experience with the systems she critiques on YouTube.

The above dynamic is clearest in her 2021 Patreon video, "Building My Sephora VIB Sale Cart." Each year, the makeup store Sephora has a "very important buyer" sale in which they offer products at a tier-based discount. Ti's video features her trying to cut a \$400 list worth of

³⁹⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (University of Edinburgh, 1956).

products in half. She talks about each item in her cart, musing about whether it will make the cut. When she gets to a liquid blush from Selena Gomez's brand Rare Beauty, Ti states, "the one thing that has kept me from trying this brand [Rare Beauty] is that it's Selena Gomez. I don't wanna support her. I low key do not want to support celebrity brands if I can avoid them...I'm done with celebrities...Is it better to support Lancome than this? Not really."³⁹⁸ Much like in her YouTube video "Is This What Build Back Better Looks Like?", Ti notes the lack of ethical consumption under capitalism. However, in this case, that messaging is implicitly couched in her personal consumption choices. The audience, then, is framed as individuals who are already aware about the perils of capitalism. Because of that, they get access to a part of Ti's life that politically ignorant viewers would not. There are, of course, exceptions to any generalization about an audience. Ti might have patrons who are not politically active and are primarily interested in her cosmetics-related content. At the same time, Ti frames her YouTube as a pathway to Patreon, and her YouTube brand centers a politics-makeup hybrid.

This presumed YouTube-to-Patreon trajectory constitutes individual self-disclosure as reward—not just for contributing directly to Ti's income, but for already being politically activated. To make sense of Ti's individual choices, one must first grasp the systemic dynamics that inform her socially responsive actions. Thus, an added layer to the creator-relationship emerges: financial support suggests political like-mindedness. To get the depth of relationship that Patreon subscribers look for, Ti's subscribers must be plugged into social justice discourse.

³⁹⁸ Nappyheadedjojoba, "Building my Sephora VIB Sale Cart. Is There Anything Worth Getting?" Patreon, November 5, 2021, video, 33:59, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/building-my-vib-58345580>.

Challenging Respectability Through AAVE

In direct contrast to her performance of respectability politics on YouTube, Ti frames Patreon as an enclave community in which she can challenge respectability politics through African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This subversive act can be seen by viewers as an act of ratchetry, given its existence outside of notions of respectability. Defined as “digital practice born of everyday banal, sensual, forward, and ‘deviant’ political behavior that is rooted in Black culture and discourse,” ratchetry is a tool at the disposal of Black users to challenge notions of whiteness as morally superior.³⁹⁹ It is a form of unapologetic, uncensored Blackness in predominantly white spaces. At the same time, the term “ratchet” can also pathologize non-white practices; thus, it works in conversation with racism.

Ti’s Patreon invokes ratchetry through language—particularly AAVE. AAVE is a specific dialect spoken by African American communities that has its own grammatical rules and semiotic structures. Of particular note is Ti’s repeated use of the word “chile” in her Patreon videos. An abbreviated version of the word “child,” AAVE’s “chile” is culturally legible to insider communities. While some white digital users may attribute this word to Twitter’s recent “stan culture,” it can be historically traced to the 1950s.⁴⁰⁰

Much like Ti’s assumption of insider knowledge based on discursive references to cosmetics and politics, Ti’s use of AAVE has a community-building function. This language is not meant for white people—as such, Ti creates an enclave community despite the reality that she has white patrons. Intimacy, then, is associated with safety and insider knowledge based on positionality.

³⁹⁹ Brock, 126.

⁴⁰⁰ Brooklyn White, “No, ‘Chile’ is Not Stan Culture—It’s AAVE,” *Girls United*, accessed September 18, 2022, <https://girlsunited.essence.com/article/aave-language-chile/>.

A similar use of AAVE is when Ti states that she does not know if she will purchase from the brand Anastasia Beverly Hills because she's "still feeling some type of way about this brand."⁴⁰¹ This feeling that Ti has is unnamed, but is presumed negative, given her hesitance to purchase, alongside ABH's recent public scandals. The phrase "some type of way," commonly found in reality television, is present in AAVE expressions, particularly to connote visceral emotion.⁴⁰² In addition to its cultural legibility among AAVE-speakers, this phrase pushes back against the notion of Black emotion as inherently excessive or unruly. Ti states feeling some type of way calmly, yet does not avoid the affective meaning of the expression. White audiences may be able to pick up on what Ti means through context clues, but Ti's language is directed at an insider community that has historically been left out.

Conclusion

Ti's refusal to perform unfettered intimacy and authenticity on YouTube is an institutional critique against the normative structures. Thus, Ti's performance of these seemingly ubiquitous attributes on YouTube take on an expressly political dimension, which works in conversation with the discursive emphasis on politics in her "Ti Talks GRWM" videos. Dobson et al argue against the public conception that intimacy online is *too* public—instead, taking a political economic approach, they note that digital platforms are not public enough. Here, they frame "public" as a public good. Intimacy performance on commercial platforms is private in the sense that it is owned and controlled by private corporations.⁴⁰³ Ti's digital platforms invoke a similar critique by offering a multilayered authentic self on Patreon. While Patreon is a private,

⁴⁰¹ Nappyheadedjojoba, "Building my Sephora VIB Sale Cart."

⁴⁰² Racquel Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 167.

⁴⁰³ Dobson et al, 22.

commercial platform, commitments to creator agency and power is reflected in the subscription-model, a larger percentage of which is sent directly to creators.

Ti does perform intimacy on YouTube—yet by employing platform-specific intimacy that foregrounds urgency, Ti uses that intimacy to reveal the systems of oppression in which her audience is complacent. Her intimacy performance is a call to make her viewers do something, rather than a claim that she can adhere to YouTube’s industrial norms. Simultaneously though, Ti *does* technically adhere to some norms while also turning them on their head. As has been well-established, intimacy performance online has specific gendered implications. This chapter argues that intimacy performance online also has specific platform conventions and norms, depending on the creator’s positionality and their audience. The architecture of each platform structure invites specific kinds of interactions with audiences. In other words, the technological affordances and constraints intersect with social dynamics that bring negotiations of race, gender, and class to the fore.

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Chapter Four: Jenna Marbles and Postfeminist Failure

In June of 2020, YouTuber Jenna Mourey (username Jenna Marbles) rattled the Internet. After 12 years of Jenna making videos “every Wednesday/Thursday,” audiences were shocked to watch her video titled “A Message.” The original video has since been deleted, but reuploads are on YouTube. In the video, Mourey acknowledged viewer requests to address some problematic past content, including a Nicki Minaj impression that resembled blackface, racist lyrics in a rap-style music video, and a slut-shaming video. Mourey apologized for these videos, stating that she “didn’t want to offend...or hurt anyone,” that she aimed to create inclusive content, and that she was on the Internet to “have a good time.” Noting that she “didn’t think [she was] having a good time anymore,” Mourey left YouTube.⁴⁰⁴ Two years later, Mourey is still silent online.

Many microcelebrities leave YouTube. In fact, it has been widely observed that public figures who started their careers on YouTube are fleeing the site in favor of platforms like TikTok. Mourey’s departure was also in tandem with a sort of “reckoning” on YouTube, where household names like Shane Dawson and Jeffree Star were facing backlash for racist content. Even though Mourey’s trajectory mirrored that of several other influencers, the public response to her leaving had a distinct tone of outrage and dismay. Viewers pointed to Mourey’s story as evidence of cancel culture going too far. Mainstream news outlets produced stories about Mourey’s departure. Videos like “Why the End of Jenna Marbles is the End of Authenticity” emerged on YouTube.⁴⁰⁵ Viewers come back to Mourey’s old content and comment that they miss Jenna or that they return to her channel for comfort.

⁴⁰⁴ JohnyR82, “Jenna Marbles: A Message [Reupload],” YouTube, July 7, 2020, video, 11:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHVAPxz6-aE>.

⁴⁰⁵ Internet Impact, “Why the End of Jenna Marbles is the End of Authenticity,” YouTube, October 13, 2020, video, 29:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4GR1wd4H4U&t=60s>.

All of this is to say that Mourey made a sustained, sweeping impact on YouTube. On YouTube's fleeting attention economy, long-term visibility is difficult to achieve. Paradoxically, visibility is a central component to the digital attention economy.⁴⁰⁶ Virality is inherently ephemeral, yet YouTube punishes creators whose later content underperforms in comparison to their viral videos. The algorithm is constantly changing and trending topics appear and disappear at a rapid pace. Information about the algorithm's changes is not accessible to YouTubers, so content creators must guess what will be popular on the platform.⁴⁰⁷ Yet despite these barriers to sustained visibility online, Mourey remained a quantitatively and qualitatively popular YouTuber for ten years. Ending her YouTube career with 20 million subscribers, Mourey was commonly referred to as the Queen of YouTube. On top of that, Mourey sustained high view counts throughout her YouTube career, regularly earning millions of views per video. As such, examining Jenna Marbles is not just an exercise in considering popularity online, it is a look into *sustained* popularity online.

There are content creators who generate loyal fanbases over the years. What makes Mourey a particularly interesting case study is that her overwhelming success online is somehow also marked by failure. Mourey's later content (ranging from 2017-2020) features her desperately trying to be part of the beauty community—or, as Mourey refers to them, “beautubers.” In fact, “Get Ready With Me to Go Nowhere,” one of Mourey's final videos, makes explicit references to Mourey's failure to be a beauty guru. She begins the video stating, “I never make videos like this because I feel like no one wants to watch them because who cares? ‘Cause I’m not a beauty guru, but I am in the beautiful people club, whether they want me

⁴⁰⁶ Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, & Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 14.

⁴⁰⁷ Sophie Bishop, “Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 73.

or not.” She ends the video on a similar vein, noting, “it felt nice to, I’m not gonna lie, nice to just do a sit down get ready with me. Because although the beautiful people keep vehemently asking me to get the fuck out of their community, I’m not. I’m here to stay.”⁴⁰⁸

To be clear, most of Mourey’s audience does not perceive her as a failure. In fact, in online communities, she is framed as a wild success and a role model who paved a path for women on YouTube. In capitalist terms, Mourey’s career was an undeniable success. Yet Mourey’s Internet performance is one of failure. She tries to follow YouTube beauty tutorials and fails. Instead of performing the “aspirational woman” who achieves flawless makeup looks with \$150 foundation, Mourey frames her channel as a brutally honest tale of what happens when you enter a space that is not made for you. In essence, Mourey’s failure illuminates the inaccessibility of a seemingly open, democratizing space.

Methodologically, I used Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). Similar to Critical Discourse Analysis, CTDA examines how content creators’ spoken and written discourse reflect institutional power relations. It is a holistic humanistic method that can be informed by critical theory such as critical race theory, feminist theory, or queer theory. My approach was grounded in feminist and queer theory. Specifically, I drew from literature on postfeminism and popular feminism, as well as queering failure and camp as queer performance. In addition to examining creator discourse, CTDA also examines platform architecture—including its affordances and constraints—as a form of discourse. As such, I examined how Mourey works within YouTube’s affordances while simultaneously challenging its conventions. My dataset included a year’s worth of Mourey’s beauty-related videos, ranging from March 2019-March 2020. I argue that by positioning herself as a YouTube viewer who unsuccessfully

⁴⁰⁸ Jenna Mourey, “Get Ready With Me to Go Nowhere,” YouTube, April 1, 2020, video, 15:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNuurt3mpr8>.

attempts tutorials, framing excess in contrast to the quest for natural beauty, exaggerating her status as an aging 32-33 year old lady, and flouting YouTube's self-branding conventions, Mourey reveals an attention economy in the beauty community that privileges postfeminist norms of age, beauty, and femininity. Perhaps unintentionally, Mourey borrows from queer transgressions—such as queering failure and performing excess—that subvert hegemonic structures. Mourey's work demonstrates that YouTube's beauty community has more barriers-to-entry than one might initially assume and suggests that even in a cultural moment of “women's empowerment,” women's bodies are heavily disciplined.

The Evolution of Jenna Marbles

Mourey, whose last video was published in 2020, started her YouTube channel in 2010, a time when getting paid to create content online was relatively novel. She ended her YouTube career with 19.8 million subscribers. Her about page just features a link that redirects to that same page. She had a Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram during her social media career, yet the content on those other platforms has since been deleted.

After getting her Masters degree in Sports Psychology, Mourey worked a series of part time jobs, including blogging for Barstool Sports, go-go dancing, and bartending, among others. On a whim, Mourey started a YouTube channel. The username “Jenna Marbles” was inspired by Mourey's chihuahua Mr. Marbles. Originally, Mourey gave her channel her legal name. After finding out that potential employers of her job-seeking mother were getting hits on Mourey's channel, she changed the name.⁴⁰⁹

Mourey's earliest content (most of which is now deleted) featured slices of daily life: she filmed herself getting her Italian Greyhound named Kermit. She ranted about her terrible

⁴⁰⁹ Larry King, “Jenna Marbles Chats #SexualWednesday, Kermit the Dog and ‘Smosh: The Movie,’” YouTube, December 2, 2017, video, 26:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9dj5WjFJFU>.

roommate. These were low-production, rambling videos that gained a couple thousand views. Then, in July of 2010, Mourey posted a video titled “How To Trick People Into Thinking You’re Good Looking.” This video, only 2.5 minutes long, features a satirical skit of Mourey teaching her viewers how to be good looking “if you were born really ugly like me.” She advises her audience to bleach their hair and tan their skin, to wear black eye makeup “that says, ‘I’m a whore!’,” and to “draw on cartoonish eyebrows.” The final step is to “cry over your Masters degree” and “get a job that’s super degrading...[like] dancing in [your] underwear.”⁴¹⁰ While this video was posted prior to the height of the beauty community’s popularity, it did seem to parody beauty standards for western women as a whole. It clearly struck a chord with her audience—over the weekend following her posting, the video became viral. It now has 72 million views.

Since the viral posting, Mourey began making money from her YouTube videos. She started posting a new video once a week, dubbing her video day “Sexual Wednesday” (a title that Mourey has confirmed is arbitrary, given that her content is not sexual).⁴¹¹ She would plan, film, edit, and publish her videos within the span of one day (though sometimes she would post her videos on the occasional Thursday). Mourey’s earlier videos (pre 2017 era) featured gender-specific skits titled “What Girls Do When...” or “What Guys Do When...”. She also impersonated celebrity figures and made mock beauty tutorials. Much like Mourey’s recent content, the videos were meant to be funny and harmless.

Unlike her recent videos, Mourey’s early content fell squarely under the definition of parody. Parody has a slippery definition and has been the subject of scholarly debate. Some definitions of parody include “a form of mimicry marked by critical distance from the text it

⁴¹⁰ Jenna Mourey, “How to Trick People Into Thinking You’re Good Looking,” YouTube, July 9, 2010, video, 2:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYpwAtnywTk>.

⁴¹¹ Larry King, “Jenna Marbles Chats #SexualWednesday, Kermit the Dog and ‘Smosh: The Movie,’” YouTube, December 2, 2017, video, 26:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9dj5WjFJFU>.

references” through strategic or passionate performance⁴¹², a form of public discourse that reveals limitations of hegemonic ideologies through imitation and alteration,⁴¹³ and ritualized practice of meta-commentary.⁴¹⁴ These conceptualizations hold a through-line of framing parody as a form of engaged commentary on social issues. Parody can present differently, depending on the medium of the critique: in other words, parodic critique in speeches has different conventions than parody on social media platforms. Nonetheless, parody can be a form of political critique and, similar to Mourey’s early parodic performances, has been used in expressly feminist ways. Amy Schumer’s series, *Inside Amy Schumer* is one example of feminist parody: here, Schumer uses incongruous strategies to expose the limitations of postfeminist logics.⁴¹⁵ Despite Schumer and Mourey’s similar tactics—especially when thinking about Mourey’s early career—there is notable difference in that Schumer expressly identifies as a feminist offstage. Thus, there is less room for ambiguity in Schumer’s parodic performance. Conversely, Mourey’s parodic content carried with it potential to be read as antifeminist.

Mourey’s early meta-commentary is in good company with other mediated feminist parody. Yet because her content was on a new, seemingly democratizing platform, Mourey’s parodic performance had a degree of authenticity and intimacy that one might not see on mainstream television. Framing parody as having “the potential to challenge normative conceptions, as parody ‘seeks to transform its audience’s consciousness so that it can no longer view the object of parody in the same way ever again,’” Wotanis and McMillan note that Mourey

⁴¹² Lillian Boxman-Shabtai, “The Practice of Parodying: YouTube as a Hybrid Field of Cultural Production,” *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 1 (2019): 4.

⁴¹³ Robert Hariman, “Political Parody and Public Culture,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 250.

⁴¹⁴ Tim Highfield, “News Via Voldemort: Parody Accounts in Topical Discussions on Twitter,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 9 (2016): 2042.

⁴¹⁵ Meg Tully, “‘Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Don’t Rape’: Subverting Postfeminist Logics on *Inside Amy Schumer*,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 4 (2017): 339-358.

used parody to critique gender norms while simultaneously adhering to them.⁴¹⁶ In other words, Mourey exaggerated western norms of feminine beauty, taking up a “hot girl” identity, while also mocking it.⁴¹⁷

At times, Mourey’s parodic commentary pushed inappropriate boundaries. Mourey was not the subject of many public scandals, but she did face criticism for going too far in her impersonation of Nicki Minaj. In that same video, Mourey did blackface, though she later noted that she used self-tanner that did not resemble blackface without the blonde wig featured in the video. Despite the cultural moment of this video being less of a reckoning than the 2020 era, Mourey still recalls being “crucified” in the comments. Similarly, online feminist spaces responded to Mourey’s slut-shaming content, calling it victim-blaming. Moments like these influenced the course of Mourey’s career, making for notable tonal shifts in her content. She stopped her gendered series and left her celebrity impersonations behind.

2017 marked a significant shift in Mourey’s content. In lieu of the sarcastic, parody-style videos her audience came to expect, Mourey moved towards the silly and absurd. She still used humor to critique dominant norms of femininity, but did so with an air of playfulness. She established a comedy-style series called “Jenna’s Ratchet Salon,” in which she attempted various beauty techniques. The use of the term “ratchet” is explicitly racialized. Regardless of Mourey’s intentions, it is important to note the domination of whiteness on YouTube. This term alludes to performance of Blackness as a violation on a space that reads whiteness as beautiful. As noted by André Brock, Black cyberculture incorporates performance of “ratchetry”—“the willingness to intentionally be Black and perform Blackness in spaces that are still uninterested in recognizing

⁴¹⁶ Lindsey Wotanis and Laurie McMillan, “Performing Gender on YouTube: How Jenna Marbles Negotiates a Hostile Online Environment,” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 6 (2014): 915.

⁴¹⁷ Emma Maguire, “Self-Branding, Hotness, and Girlhood in the Video Blogs of Jenna Marbles,” *Biography (Honolulu)* 38, no. 1 (2015): 72-86.

Black agency.”⁴¹⁸ While one might read Mourey’s use of “ratchet” as a critique of YouTube’s perpetuation antiblackness, her unsettling history with black face complicates this rhetorical choice.

In her later content, Mourey still took viewer requests, but as her reputation for absurdist content grew, she began getting requests to do her nails with ramen, to make a chair entirely made out of blue jeans, and to paint a tiny face on her existing face. Mourey has explicitly observed this evolution in her content, categorizing her videos as “Jenna’s selfish time,” and noting that she just does “what make[s] [her] laugh.”⁴¹⁹ As seen in the image below, Mourey’s latest videos are often absurd and seemingly random. This period is where Mourey’s playful, silly, and absurd content took off. Despite the marked change in this content, Mourey still generated millions of views on each of her videos.

⁴¹⁸ André Brock, 129.

⁴¹⁹ Jenna Mourey, “A Face Full of Rhinestones,” YouTube, March 23, 2017, video, 10:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RycMNSM8Mns>.

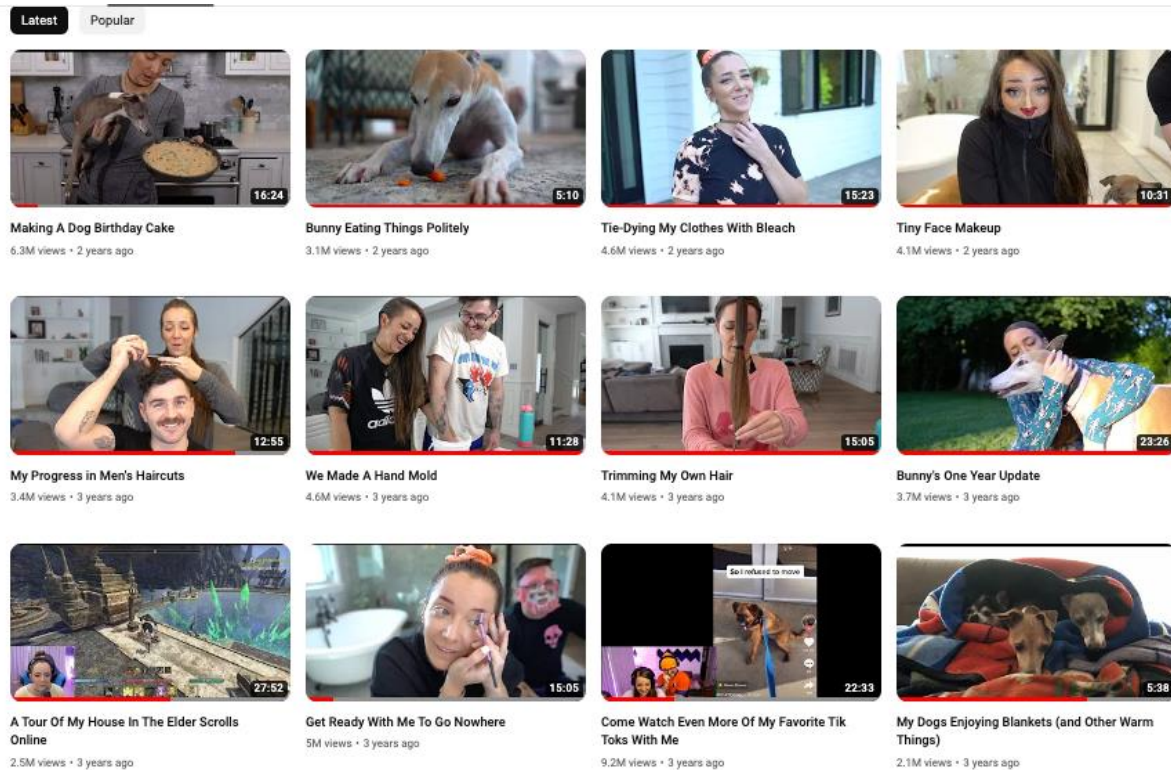


Figure 7

Importantly, Mourey is not a recognized member of YouTube's beauty community. While a great deal of her latest content features cosmetic play, her regular faux pas (or failures, as I will later discuss), use of the word "beautuber" over "beauty guru" and lack of adherence to generic conventions maintain Mourey's status as an outsider to the beauty community. That being said, it is this very outsider status and Mourey's corresponding failures to be a recognized "insider" that informs my interest in this case study.

Mourey regularly posted weekly videos with the occasional two-week hiatus until June of 2020. Then, she posted the aforementioned video announcing her departure from YouTube. While some claimed that Mourey's leaving was indicative of cancel culture going too far, others argued that Mourey "cancelled herself," and that it appeared that her "heart wasn't really in it"

for an extended period of time.⁴²⁰ As of now, there is no indication that Mourey will return on YouTube. Her partner Julien still regularly posts streaming videos on YouTube, offering occasional updates on his and Jenna's experience fostering greyhound dogs. Despite Mourey's extended absence online, her channel functions as a case study of sustained popularity and feminist transgression on YouTube. Indeed, this extended, heightened success online likely gave Mourey the financial freedom to retire from YouTube early on. This circumstance is not the norm for online microcelebrities, given digital platforms' oversaturation of figures trying to "make it." While this piece is not a step by step "how to" guide for influencers trying to gain visibility, it does illuminate strategies of subversion that do not sacrifice the demands of YouTube's attention economy. In other words, it extends a path for scholars and content creators alike to consider visibility strategies that do not solely reproduce hegemonic gender norms.

It is important to note that Mourey has not publicly self-identified as a feminist. There has been online speculation about Mourey's relationship with feminism, but Mourey's personal relationship with feminism is unknown. While self-identification and naming can be a powerful tool, this chapter considers how Mourey engages a feminist politic through her digital performance. I present a case study of small, everyday transgressions through examining the YouTube channel Jenna Marbles. My argument, then, is bigger than Mourey. Instead, it is a look into the ways that women in the beauty community can critique damaging, limiting, hegemonic social norms without sacrificing visibility online. Additionally, it considers the political power of play, despite its deeply ambivalent relationship with labor on social media platforms. One can

⁴²⁰ Smokey Glow, "Jenna Marbles: You're Missing the Point," YouTube, June 26, 2020, video, 17:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWgNmCxY97g&t=1s>.

use these tools of transgression without self-identifying as a feminist, much like one can self-identify as a feminist without engaging politics whatsoever.⁴²¹

Visibility online is a constant negotiation. Rarely does a visible YouTuber completely subvert platform conventions—at least, not for an extended period of time. To succeed in YouTube’s attention economy, one must adhere to some hegemonic gendered, raced, and classed norms. At the same time, there is potential for these norms to be turned on their heads, or shed in a new light. Mourey’s performance is by no means radical. If it were, chances are she would have had a far less successful career. But without tuning into the small transgressions, the “feminist blips,” if you will, one might assume that the beauty space leaves no room for political critique. Examining Mourey’s everyday, micro transgressions aligns with cultural studies scholars’ calls to notice subversive potential in mundane places. In fact, micro-transgressions in spaces that aim to reinforce hegemonic cultural norms can be a form of “practiced place,” or De Certeau’s conceptualization of space—Fiske’s famous example of teenagers loitering in shopping malls, carrying alcohol in soda cans, and blocking store windows highlights subversive acts that are mundane, yet anti-capitalist nonetheless. In essence, the teenagers, seen as powerless to the force of capitalism, are “making do” with embodied resources of creativity.⁴²² Of course, unlike the aforementioned teenagers, Mourey does benefit from YouTube’s capitalist model. Put plainly, she makes money by branding herself online. Yet she also reveals postfeminist logics that are surreptitiously threaded through the platform. In doing so, she illuminates dominant ideologies that YouTube embodies yet obscures. This work responds to late capitalism’s ability to hide conditions of oppression:

⁴²¹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁴²² John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

The structures of early capitalism were visible, its agencies of power easily apprehensible. When the factory owner lived in the house on the hill and workers in terraced cottages in the shadow and smoke of the factory or pithead, everyone knew the system that ordered where he or she worked or dwelt. The system was as visible as its inequalities; its power was naked. The shift to corporate capitalism was a shift toward invisibility; the system became more abstract, more distanced from the concrete experiences of everyday life and thus less apprehensible. In late capitalism's further shift to the multinational that transcends nations or states, the system has become so distant, so removed, so inapprehensible that its power to control and order the details of everyday life has paradoxically diminished.⁴²³

Content creators on YouTube are very much controlled by the dominant forces of corporate capitalism. In the wake of claims of self-commodification as equivalent to self-expression, the domineering forces of YouTube's attention economy are obscured. In response, Mourey's performance of failure, her exaggerated performance of age and excess, and her subversion of YouTube's industrial conventions suggest that feminist acts are possible online, even in conjunction with YouTube's incentives to perform a strictly postfeminist, neoliberal self.

“I’m Ready to Look Snatched and Poppin’!”: Positioning Herself as Viewer

Mourey's performance of failure is particularly evident when she positions herself as a viewer. Indeed, a common theme in Mourey's videos is failed attempts at following beauty tutorials. This kind of video contrasts that of the “successful” beauty guru. To sell products to their viewers, beauty gurus *create* tutorials that name, (sometimes) list the price in the description box and onscreen, and link the products they use in their videos. Occasionally, they have discount codes to further incentivize consumption. To promote product purchases, these tutorials are marked by a balance of aspirationality and accessibility. This strategy is in keeping with theories of aspirational realness—a corporate branding technique that links celebrating the authentic,

⁴²³ Fiske, 35.

“real you” with consumption.⁴²⁴ Beauty gurus create looks that are youthful, natural, soft, and glowy—they often explicitly link these qualities to femininity. The ideal beauty tutorial makes viewers want to look like the beauty guru in question, but must always see themselves as capable of accomplishing those looks. In essence, it must uphold the democratizing ethos of YouTube: *anyone* can do it if they try hard enough. Mourey breaks the mold by *not* doing it, despite valiantly trying.

Mourey’s failure is not just a self-deprecating act. Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* reveals the resistive potential failure has when employed by marginalized populations. Indeed, it can function as a form of feminist pleasure. Failure, in this context, pushes back against heteronormative, capitalist, patriarchal ideals of success and relieves women of disciplinary mechanisms on their bodies. Success and failure are deeply ideological terms—so when a woman fails according to Western standards, she reveals limitations and inequities implicit in those norms. Failure, then, sheds to light alternative ways of living in the world that do not reify hegemonic norms. It is a feminist act of refusal that is unruly, messy, and counterhegemonic.⁴²⁵ Unruliness is a transgressive feminist tactic employed by women who do not fit white, western standards of feminine beauty, fragility, or concurrent sensuality and modesty. Most often, the unruly woman makes her transgression legible through laughter.⁴²⁶ On YouTube, Mourey performs her own playful unruliness, as her silly, ridiculous, and absurd failure is a critique of postfeminist culture in the beauty community and dominant industrial norms on YouTube. Together, these critiques tell a story of YouTube’s beauty community as gatekeeping and limiting.

⁴²⁴ Rosie Findlay, “‘Trust Us, We’re You’: Aspirational Realness in the Digital Communication of Contemporary Fashion and Beauty Brands,” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 12, no. 4 (2019): 553-569.

⁴²⁵ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁴²⁶ Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

By trying to follow tutorials and failing, Mourey reveals gaps in the promise of accessibility and illuminates the required skill and knowledge in cosmetic play. She breaks the façade of aspiration through the mode of failure. Instead of taking the role of content creator who influences purchases through advertising, Mourey herself is the consumer who is committed to achieving looks in existing tutorials. She makes clear this distinction in two ways: first, she explains her motivation for doing certain videos during her introductions. Oftentimes, her motivation comes from consuming media on YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram. Sometimes her media consumption stems from wanting inspiration for her content, but other times, she frames it as simply being a person looking for entertainment. Second, she includes clips from the original tutorial in her video, followed by her attempts to master each step. This strategy is distinct from parody, as it does not distance her from the original source material. Instead, it positions Mourey as someone who admires and wants to achieve the tutorial look—thus mirroring the desires of the viewer.

In the dataset I collected, we can see Mourey’s most egregious performances of failure in two YouTube videos: “Trying Hair Braiding Tutorials” and “Trying to Make My Own Wig.” The former video positions Mourey not just as a viewer, but a viewer who is beholden to algorithmic culture. She introduces the video stating, “sometimes I go on Instagram, and I just start to feel real bad about myself, you know what I’m saying? I feel like the algorithm often points me towards small little viral beauty clips, if you will, some of which are hair videos. It really makes me think about the fact that I just never really do my hair.”⁴²⁷ This observation highlights an insidious element of new media algorithms: they push gender-normative content to target demographics and create new problems for users to solve through consumption. Phrases

⁴²⁷ Jenna Mourey, “Trying Hair Braiding Tutorials,” YouTube, March 21, 2019, video, 18:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m5TvH-D5tQ&t=930s>.

like “the algorithm points me towards,” paired with “it makes me think,” demonstrates how algorithmic culture can play an influential part in user subjectivity. Mourey’s Instagram created a desire for her to learn how to do her hair, thus directing her decision to try hair braiding tutorials.

Mourey’s hair-braiding attempts go poorly. She tries braiding a wig on her partner Julien and tries braiding her own hair, but fails to mirror the looks on Instagram. She notes looking like she’s “from another century,” that she’s “cosplaying Jesus,” or that she looks “either 9 or 100 [years old],” none of which are ideal for the modern postfeminist woman.⁴²⁸ Revealing why she failed in explicit terms, Mourey states, “this is why you see stuff like this on Instagram and on YouTube. It doesn’t belong on anybody’s head! It’s just as fake as the rest of Instagram.”⁴²⁹ This is an explicit call-out against the seeming democratizing ethos of new media platforms. What appears easy and accessible is actually quite challenging for the average non-beauty expert to accomplish. In other words, Mourey failed because the algorithm led her to believe that 1) she had to start paying more attention to her hair and 2) she could achieve the looks that she was fed online.

It is important to note that there are key platform distinctions here. Instagram, though starting to privilege performances of authenticity through its reels feature, privileges performance of wealth via conspicuous consumption. It is common to see Instagram celebrities flaunt their wealth through visual imagery of luxury and excess. The key attribute in Instagram celebrity is aspirationality.⁴³⁰ A similar performance of excess wealth on YouTube may result in audience disapproval and accusations of being a “sell out” or “out of touch.”⁴³¹ However, Mourey’s inclusion of YouTube in her critique speaks to a larger phenomenon happening across

⁴²⁸ Mourey, “Trying Hair Braiding Tutorials.”

⁴²⁹ Mourey, “Trying Hair Braiding Tutorials.”

⁴³⁰ Alice Marwick, “Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy,” *Public Culture* 27, no. 1 (2015): 141.

⁴³¹ Anna Barritt.

new media platforms: influencers make difficult techniques look accessible to urge their audiences to consume—whether that be more tutorials or products.

“Trying to Make My Own Wig” reveals the requisite cosmetic skill implicit in YouTube tutorials. Much like the previous example, Mourey notes that she was fed wig-making tutorials on YouTube through the recommendations feature. Still positioning herself as the viewer, Mourey verbalizes the thought process of the beauty community’s target audience. She states, “I see all these videos on YouTube, and I’m like, ‘I could do that. I could do that...maybe.’”⁴³² After watching these tutorials, Mourey takes the task into her own hands. She makes clear that she is not making fun of these tutorials and that she is genuinely trying to make a wig she is proud of.

Repeatedly, Mourey notes that the YouTubers she’s following make the task at hand look easy. This is a sought-after quality in a capitalist society because implicit in ease is speed. In fact, modern labor conditions force workers to produce goods quickly.⁴³³ This same logic pervades spaces of leisure, as neoliberalism conditions subjects to apply economic frameworks to all facets of life.⁴³⁴ In an economy where consumers’ attention is demanded by many different external forces, an easy homemade wig is a promise of artistic reward without the unnecessary hours of toiling with sewing machines. As such, the assumed barrier-to-entry decreases. Mourey finds out that even though YouTube told her she could hot glue herself a wig, doing so well takes “God-tiered skill.”⁴³⁵ Thus, as noted in the video’s description box, wig-making takes a great deal of practice. Since the cost of the raw materials is already equal to a costume wig, viewers

⁴³² Jenna Mourey, “Trying To Make My Own Wig,” YouTube, August 29, 2019, video, 17:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faDDENDHyF8>.

⁴³³ John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed*.

⁴³⁴ Carolyn Hardin, “Finding the ‘Neo’ in Neoliberalism,” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 207.

⁴³⁵ Jenna Mourey, “Trying to Make My Own Wig.”

lose incentive to spend hundreds of dollars on multiple rounds of practice. Not only is practice time consuming, but it necessitates a wealth of time and money. By failing to make her own wig on the first try and observing that the solution is practice, Mourey reveals the privilege behind successfully following beauty tutorials. In this case, one needs both the temporal and financial capital to be able to buy the materials and use them repeatedly.

Even when Mourey does not completely fail in her attempts to follow tutorials, she reveals postfeminist norms of beauty in her ostensibly successful “beautuber” quests. “Giving Myself a Tape Face Lift” exemplifies the disciplinary function of claims to women’s empowerment. The beauty community has tended towards claims of “natural beauty.” Modern women are getting rid of their lip fillers and Botox injections in droves.⁴³⁶ However, instead of advising their viewers to embrace aging, beauty gurus curate DIY remedies for the curse of getting older. Tape face lifts are among them. Mourey notes that she is doing this for fun in addition to the fact that she does not get Botox because she is “scared of needles.”⁴³⁷ While play can be a resistive act that pushes back against neoliberal demands of being “always on,” we must not lose sight of the fact that YouTube is a platform that monetizes play. Thus, what appears to be leisure in the eyes of the viewer is labor to the content creator. Furthermore, cosmetic play is a form of aesthetic labor that has been repackaged as empowering, fun, and relaxing.⁴³⁸ This phenomenon is in keeping with postfeminist notions of personal freedom and pleasure. Thus, the spirit of fun in beauty videos in part reinforces the demands to work tirelessly and be “always on” online.

⁴³⁶ Christiana Tsaousi, “How to Organise Your body 101: Postfeminism and the (Re)construction of the Female Body through *How to Look Good Naked*, *Media Culture & Society* 29, no. 2 (2017): 146.

⁴³⁷ Jenna Mourey, “Giving Myself a Tape Face Lift” YouTube, November 20, 2019 video, 16:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGjDZwdqjIE>.

⁴³⁸ Michelle Lazar, “‘Seriously Girly Fun!’: Recontextualizing Aesthetic Labor as Fun and Play in Cosmetics Advertising,” in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, eds. Ana Sofia Elias et al (New York: Macmillan Publisher Ltd, 2017), 51-65.

Mourey's performance of play is a departure from parody. Here, I theorize play as ambivalent transgression. Much like parody, play can offer critical commentary about systems of oppression. Distinct from parody is play's proximity to subjects of critique. Creators who engage play do not distance themselves from original source materials. Indeed, there is a degree of admiration for the very subjects and systems they critique. This admiration is marked by ambivalence. In Mourey's case, she frames cosmetic application as a fun, playful form of leisure. At the same time, her cosmetic play is marked by desire to achieve results that reinforce hegemonic norms of femininity. As it turns out, achieving those results is physically impossible for Mourey's body. When she fails, she exaggerates her performance of play, using it to reveal the disciplining function of the beauty community's standards of successful makeup application. In other words, Mourey's particular branding of play disrupts beauty gurus' performances of play by taking her cosmetic application in a direction that is conceivably too far, too wild, and too unruly.

Mourey immediately positions herself as a viewer by noting her inspiration to do this video: indeed, it was another YouTube find by a beauty guru. Here, Mourey articulates viewer internalization of desire: "she promised me I would look snatched and poppin', so I'm ready to look snatched and poppin'!" This language is surprising and incongruous when coming out of Mourey's mouth, which draws attention to her whiteness. Mourey's incongruous use of AAVE reflects a larger phenomenon that occurs in the beauty space: white beauty gurus and makeup brands appropriate long-standing cosmetic traditions in Black spaces, all while not crediting original sources, nor advocating for Black communities' well-being. Indeed, as noted in chapter 3, AAVE can be a resistive means of calling to attention the overwhelming whiteness of YouTube's beauty community.

While perhaps a tongue-in-cheek remark, Mourey's statement also reveals an integral quality of YouTube's beauty community: its tutorials (arguably the foundation of the community) promise a certain outcome to its viewers—one that usually makes its subjects look feminine, youthful, and natural. Thus, Mourey illuminates motives the beauty community embodies beyond play. Beneath the surface, there lies desire to achieve a socially desirable appearance.

Perhaps most revealing about the realities of postfeminist fun is in Mourey's interaction with Julien when she has the tape on her face:

Mourey: "Is this what looking beautiful feels like?"

Julien: "Is it painful?"

Mourey: "Yeah."

Julien: "Yeah."⁴³⁹

Besides revealing a perhaps harsh reality of Western beauty norms, Mourey also reveals an important connection between subjectivity and appearance. Popular contemporary beauty gurus make claims to beauty having zero rules and emphasize the importance of feeling beautiful. This psychological turn is central in postfeminist claims to individual empowerment. Mourey and Julien's humorous exchange articulate what is *not* said in modern beauty videos: having fun with makeup and feeling empowered is usually in line with looking beautiful according to 21st century beauty standards. Mourey suggests that she is having fun, and that tape face lifts are a "fun thing" and "such a good time," yet that fun and cosmetic play entails pain.⁴⁴⁰

Mourey's performance of failure is not an absolute rejection of YouTube's beauty community, nor is it a dismissal of Western beauty norms writ large. In fact, Mourey reiterates

⁴³⁹ Mourey, "Giving Myself a Tape Face Lift."

⁴⁴⁰ Mourey, "Giving Myself a Tape Face Lift."

admiration for the skill and technique of beauty gurus. Instead of adhering to a binary of failure as complete dismissal of hegemonic ideologies or total self-deprecation, Mourey resides in the liminal space of playful failure. She wants to be part of the “beautiful people club” because makeup is fun. With that, Mourey reinforces some dominant ideologies of aesthetic labor and personal empowerment. At the same time, she uses her humor to bring to the surface requisite resources and skills in successful cosmetic application. She also illuminates some of the underpinnings of her desire to follow makeup tutorials—indeed, we see a powerful interplay of algorithmic influence and postfeminist subjectivity informing desire and notions of fun.

“Does This Look Natural?”: Contrasting Excess with Natural Beauty

A repeated trope in Mourey’s beauty videos is the question she poses to Julien: “does this look natural?” This is a funny question, given that she poses it when her face is covered in rhinestones in order to look like a disco ball, when she is wearing a bright orange homemade wig that has gaping holes in it, or when she has brown mustache dye called “Just For Men” all over her eyebrows. This question is not mere absurdism, however. In fact, part of its humor comes from the fact that “natural beauty” is a common buzzword in YouTube’s beauty community. This convention works in direct contrast to Mourey’s “too much gene” that she refers to throughout her videos. This supposed gene that Mourey has is in reference to cosmetic application. She takes a product that might look natural with a light application and applies far more than the recommended amount.

Claims of natural beauty come in part from the body positivity movement, which has had a resurgence on digital platforms. Central to this movement is the idea that women are enough as they are, and that they need not chase aspirational beauty norms through endless product consumption. Drawing from the fat acceptance movement in the 1960s and the “Black is

Beautiful” movement, current digital manifestations of body positivity focus on body positivity and corporatized, neoliberal performance of individual empowerment.⁴⁴¹ Dominant performances of body positivity reflect a postfeminist ethos that depoliticizes the movement. Mainstream body positivity “constructs individual choice as the primary means of personal empowerment, while embracing ideals of beauty and sexiness as key elements of positive body image.”⁴⁴² In response to this individualized iteration of body positivity, brands promote the idea of body positivity as achieved through consumption.⁴⁴³ They position themselves as morally aligned with women’s empowerment, which is in keeping with Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser’s observation that citizen-consumers “participate in social activism by buying something.”⁴⁴⁴ Despite performances of radical body positivity in some corners of the Internet, dominant framings of celebrating natural beauty reinforce a corporate, postfeminist lens of empowerment. Through performance of excess that does not align with hegemonic beauty norms, Mourey disrupts narrow depictions of natural beauty.

Much like the queer art of failure, Mourey borrows from queer counterhegemonic tactics. Mourey’s “too much gene” acts as a form of excess, much like queer performances of camp. Camp is “the ensemble of strategies used to enact a queer recognition of the incongruities arising from the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality.”⁴⁴⁵ Performance of camp holds a similar purpose as queering failure: it sheds to light the limitations and disciplinary function of capitalist, patriarchal, heteronormative, white social norms. Camp in particular illustrates the artificiality of

⁴⁴¹ Jasie Stokes, “Fat People of the World Unite! Subjectivity, Identity, and Representation in Fat Feminist Manifestoes,” *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 30, no. 5 (2013): 50.

⁴⁴² Darwin & Miller 2021: 880.

⁴⁴³ Murray 2013.

⁴⁴⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukharjee, “Introduction,” *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times: i*.

⁴⁴⁵ Steven Cohan et al, “Queer Eye for the Straight Guise: Camp, Postfeminism, and the Fab Five’s Makeovers of Masculinity,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, eds. Diana Negra et al (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 184.

gender performance. We see this in contexts like drag, for instance. In exaggerating the social performance of femininity, camp interrogates the assumed authenticity of gender expression.⁴⁴⁶ Excess, in this context, is a resistive act that pushes back against social norms of perceived authenticity.

Mourey's perhaps unintentional borrowing from queer performance should not be without criticism. As a wealthy, white, western woman in a heterosexual relationship, Mourey holds a great deal of privilege. Notably, because Mourey presents as straight and does not explicitly bring up LGBTQ+ issues, she is not negatively affected by YouTube's restricted mode. YouTube introduced this mode in 2010 in efforts to promote family-friendly content. It restricts content that is deemed unsafe or inappropriate for children, such as videos that include profanities or discuss drugs and alcohol, sex, or violence, among other topics.⁴⁴⁷ One such method of restriction is demonetization. In 2017, news broke that this restricted mode limited LGBTQ+ content under the premise that such content contained sexual references.⁴⁴⁸ In addition to upending LGBTQ+ creators' livelihoods, restricted mode also severely limited their content's visibility. Thus, YouTube's restricted mode was something of a death sentence on LGBTQ+ content. In discussing YouTube's censorship on an earlier podcast with Julien, Mourey states in explicit terms that she not only remained monetized due to her privileged position, but that she was not demonetized for profanity.⁴⁴⁹ Even though this podcast was prior to the news about

⁴⁴⁶ Ellie Homant and Katherine Sender, "Queer Immaterial Labor in Beauty Videos by LGBTQ-Identified YouTubers," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 5386-5404.

⁴⁴⁷ "Your YouTube Content and Restricted Mode," YouTube Help, Google, accessed August 3, 2022, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7354993?hl=en#zippy=%2Cwhat-does-restricted-mode-do%2Cis-restricted-mode-the-same-as-age-gating-or-age-restricting-videos%2Cwill-my-content-show-if-my-viewers-have-restricted-mode-turned-on>.

⁴⁴⁸ Marina Watanabe, "YouTube's Restricted Mode is Anti-LGBTQ," YouTube, March 21, 2017, video, 5:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcsFQnq5sGI>.

⁴⁴⁹ Jenna Mourey and Julien Solomita, "Podcast # 107: The Censorship/Demonetization of YouTube," YouTube, September 5, 2016, 52:29, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZK8N_tk2is&t=2179s.

LGBTQ+ creators, this observation provides some anecdotal evidence that YouTube targeted certain kinds of “inappropriate” content over others. So, Mourey can use queer tactics without threatening her privilege of visibility on YouTube.

It is important to name queer tactics and pay tribute to them, even if borrowed by those outside of the queer community. In fact, excess as a form of feminist resistance in beauty communities has been linked to performance of camp prior. Mary Celeste Kearney reminds us that “sparkle” in feminine spaces can adhere to hegemonic norms, but “such campy theatrical practices can [also] help to facilitate critical reflections on the sparklefication of girls’ culture precisely because femininity is central to them.”⁴⁵⁰ Excessive sparkle, then, uses conscious style to reveal femininity as artifice and to use playful pleasure to challenge disciplinary norms of appropriate femininity.

One such act of sparkly excess is in Mourey’s video titled “I Gave Myself a Claire’s Makeover.” Inspired by the return of ‘90s style trends, Mourey purchases many products from Claire’s. Already, she is violating a norm of adult feminine beauty, as Claire’s is a store that is targeted towards pre-teen girls. In the video’s introduction, Mourey states that she wants to see how much she can “get away with as a 32 year old lady.”⁴⁵¹ Indeed, she seems to be on a quest to find out where the “line” is for a grown woman. Embedded in this quest is an assumption that there is an objective line of appropriate femininity.

Mourey quickly violates this line without hesitation. She is covered in bright hair clips, puffy hair ties, choker necklaces, rainbow bracelets, and sparkly eyeshadow. When Mourey asks, “as someone with a too much gene, where is the line?,” Julien responds, “yeah, I think you

⁴⁵⁰ Mary Celeste Kearney, “Sparkle: Luminosity and Post-Girl Power Media,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 270.

⁴⁵¹ Jenna Mourey, “I Gave Myself a Claire’s Makeover,” YouTube, August 8, 2019, video, 14:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLVMrpByb_Q&t=609s.

passed it two minutes ago, but you still look really cute.”⁴⁵² Instead of despairing her failure to perform natural femininity, Mourey emphasizes the utility of fun in cosmetic expression. Framing the audience as disciplinary enforcers, she tells her viewers to let her know how much is too much yet also that they’re wrong.⁴⁵³ This response to the skeptical viewer is an explicit rejection of disciplinary gender norms. In fact, it turns the tables around to suggest that it is *society* who is wrong for telling 30 year old ladies that they cannot wear whatever makes them happy. Using the audience as a stand in for society, Mourey flips the script through refusal to indulge their qualms.

Mourey’s primary motive for contrasting excess with natural beauty appears to be play. But in a similar vein to positioning herself as a viewer, she articulates that not everyone has access to natural beauty. When stating her preference for bold makeup in “A Relaxing Time With Just For Men,” Mourey says, “natural glam, who is she? I don’t have the kind of face that can pull that off.”⁴⁵⁴ This statement suggests that despite the beauty community’s claims of embracing natural beauty, there is a requisite appearance pre-cosmetic application to “pull off” natural looks. If someone does not meet these expectations, they should put on more makeup, but not *too much*. Here, Mourey reveals a double standard in natural beauty. If you are not already conventionally attractive, you need not attempt natural makeup looks, but there is also an invisible line of “too much.”

“I’m a 32 Year Old Lady!”: Exaggerating Age in Postfeminist Mediascapes

Part of the postfeminist ethos is women’s desire to look youthful under the guise of empowerment. Indeed, the makeover paradigm in postfeminist ideologies includes maintaining a

⁴⁵² Mourey, “I Gave Myself a Claire’s Makeover.”

⁴⁵³ Mourey, “I Gave Myself a Claire’s Makeover.”

⁴⁵⁴ Jenna Mourey, “A Relaxing Time With Just For Men,” YouTube, March 7th, 2019, video, 15:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFU8plUZccs>.

strong hold on youth.⁴⁵⁵ While performing youthful femininity through practices like sparklefication can pay homage to queer tactics of camp, it can also act as reification of youthful norms for women. Thus, one's relationship with age(ing) and its subsequent performance is a negotiation between resistance and reification.⁴⁵⁶

YouTube's beauty community has a complicated relationship with aging. As some of the original beauty gurus move into their late 30s and 40s, they note the insecurities they face and changes they make in response to aging. At the same time, contemporary performances of beauty are in line with a cultural moment that celebrates *natural* beauty. Of course, as Mourey has revealed, there are stipulations and disciplinary mechanisms around notions of natural beauty. But one marked change in the online beauty community is the rejection of surgical intervention. There are countless claims of embracing one's individual desires and "doing what makes you feel beautiful." Of course, these individual desires are reflections of raced, classed, and gendered norms of beauty. So, it is the rule, rather than the exception, that successful beauty gurus implicitly—or explicitly—chase youth in their videos. In most explicitly branded terms, we see this move reflected in Tati Westbrook's vitamin company Halo Beauty selling anti-aging boosters. As aging beauty gurus move further away from the postfeminist ideal of youth, they work to maintain relevance online. In many ways, this mirrors the threat of invisibility that aging women face offline.

Despite not being old by any stretch of the imagination, Mourey exaggerates her aging status as a "32-33 year old lady" to reveal the ephemeral nature of hegemonic feminine beauty. Part of what makes Mourey "fail" to enter the beauty community is her observation that she is

⁴⁵⁵ Sadie Wearing, "Subjects of Rejuvenation: Aging in Postfeminist Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, eds. Diane Negra et al (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 277-305.

⁴⁵⁶ Celeste Kearney.

too old to make cosmetic products look good on her. “Get Ready With Me to Go Nowhere” offers this observation in explicit terms. Even though Mourey is not following a particular beauty tutorial in this video, she makes remarks about limitations in beauty tutorials as a genre: “I used to wear so much more makeup on my face when I was younger because I could pull it off. And now that I’m showing the signs of living so many years, my skin just looks so much better with less product on it. All the YouTube videos that I watch are always like, ‘bake this and put all this on, and do that’ and I’m just like the dustiest dustball.”⁴⁵⁷ While perhaps an exaggeration, Mourey’s statement that “all the YouTube videos” feature similar recommendations implies that assumed youth among viewers is paramount to visible beauty videos. This observation reveals something of a paradox in the beauty world: people use cosmetic products to look—and subsequently feel—better. However, much like in the contemporary beauty guru’s quest to achieve natural “no makeup makeup” looks, using cosmetics well first requires having the privilege of youth. Of course, professional beauty experts like Tati Westbrook learn and perfect new application techniques in response to their aging skin. Yet as we learned from Mourey positioning herself as the viewer, learning new techniques is a steep learning curve that requires access to material resources and time. Thus, here we see a catch-22 in the beauty community that illuminates the privileging of youth and inevitable aging out women in their 30s, 40s, and beyond.

Still positioning the viewer as the disciplinary force of society, Mourey references the comments section of her videos to push back against anti-aging advice. When Mourey applies her eyeliner, she pulls down her eye to do so. She routinely receives multiple comments that

⁴⁵⁷ Jenna Mourey, “Get Ready With Me to Go Nowhere,” YouTube, April 1, 2020, video, 15:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNuurt3mpr8>.

doing her eyeliner this way will give her wrinkles. Implicit in this critique is the assumption that wrinkles—a visible sign of aging—should be avoided at all costs. They are, to her viewers, worse than the discomfort of foregoing her preferred eyeliner application technique. Mourey blatantly responds to the cacophony of comments in two separate videos: first is in “Get Ready With Me to Go Nowhere: “‘Jenna, you shouldn’t pull your eye when you’re doing your eyeliner.’ Shut up! I’m 33, ain’t gonna stop now.”⁴⁵⁸ Second is in Giving Myself a Tape Face Lift: “I’m like ‘bitch here I am! Wrinkles and all, I’m still gonna pull my eyes. Don’t tell me what to do. It’s my face.’”⁴⁵⁹ Mourey resists the notion that she should avoid the camera with wrinkles and that cosmetic play is an investment in a youthful future self. This obstinate resistance also reveals that in a makeup climate that prides itself on having “no rules,” there are, as it turns out, rules when it comes to ensuring desirable femininity. This double standard is in keeping with hegemonic framings of the contemporary body positivity movement. There is an illusion that women are freed from the shackles of constraining beauty norms, when, in reality, there is a socially acceptable version of empowerment and “acceptable flaws.”

Mourey’s exaggeration of her age also reveals hegemonic social rules of “appropriate” aging femininity. In keeping with the “line” that she crosses with her “too much gene,” Mourey uses her age to reveal that postfeminist claims of endless choice and freedom from societal restrictions in the name of empowerment are perhaps more utopic than one might think. Mourey’s performance of “aging out” suggests that according to hegemonic western standards, women outside of the (very narrow) line of youth, can get away with sparkly, flashy, and campy

⁴⁵⁸ Jenna Mourey, “Get Ready With Me to Go Nowhere,” YouTube, April 1, 2020, video, 15:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNuurt3mpr8>.

⁴⁵⁹ Jenna Mourey, “Giving Myself a Tape Face Lift” YouTube, November 20, 2019 video, 16:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGjDZwdqjjE>.

looks for which young girls (and mass celebrities) are praised.⁴⁶⁰ Perhaps one of the campiest of Mourey's videos, "I Gave Myself a Claire's Makeover" illustrates the disparities between social norms of girls' "sparkleification" and women's "natural glow." There is a certain degree of play and silliness in a decked out Claire's makeover, an act that has been historically disciplined out of adults.⁴⁶¹ Mourey reveals the contrast between childhood and adult play with glittery accessories by showing how absurd it seems for her to give herself a Claire's makeover. She introduces the video stating, "I want to see how much I as a grown woman that maybe has no business wearing some of these accessories can get away with."⁴⁶² For the duration of the video, Mourey expresses awareness that she is not getting away with the amount of accessories she is putting on. She expressly violates her status as a "grown woman." Even though she isn't explicitly performing failure, she isn't performing aspirationality either. When zooming out on beauty standards as a whole, Mourey fails to adhere to hegemonic norms of adult femininity. While it can be common for normative beauty channels to end their videos on an inspirational note—in keeping with postfeminist norms of affect—Mourey's "lesson learned" directly challenges the arbitrary nature of appropriate femininity. And, unlike other beauty videos, it seems to directly address those outside of the beauty community's target demographic. Mourey addresses other "30 year old ladies," in the signoff of "I Gave Myself a Claire's Makeover": "I hope it also gives you confidence that even if you feel like you might be too old to pull off any of these trends, yes you can. You should wear whatever you want."⁴⁶³ Of course, the affective turn towards individual confidence aligns with neoliberal conventions of entrepreneurial spirit and

⁴⁶⁰ Mary Celeste Kearney, "Sparkle: Luminosity and Post-Girl Power Media," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 264.

⁴⁶¹ John Hartley, "Silly Citizenship," *Critical Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4 (2010): 223-248.

⁴⁶² Jenna Mourey, "I Gave Myself a Claire's Makeover," YouTube, August 8, 2019, video, 14:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLVMrpByb_Q&t=609s.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

personal responsibility.⁴⁶⁴ So again, Mourey simultaneously reifies and resists postfeminist, neoliberal norms present in the beauty community. She plays into the societal grip of the feminine “confidence gap,” while at the same time imploring women to ignore social norms of femininity.⁴⁶⁵ In other words, she invites freedom from disciplining the self (and specifically the body) in order to align with a cultural vision of what an accomplished, modern, empowered woman looks like.

Lastly, Mourey’s exaggeration of her age reveals the impetus to categorize oneself online. As YouTube becomes increasingly oversaturated, “finding your niche” is a mantra used to tell content creators how to stand out. Since age and gender are two commonly used demographics on digital platform advertising, visible content tends to align with normative expectations of these identity categories. Part of the YouTuber’s authenticity performance isn’t necessarily a reflection of a “core, unmoving self”—rather, it is a projection of audience interests. Authenticity must be legible from where the viewer is standing. Performing conventions of age, gender, race, and class are key strategies to establish a sense of authenticity.

Mourey breaks the mold by integrating glamor with performance of messy domesticity. “Making Clip in Bangs *Work* for Me” is a negotiation of the two roles that are seemingly at odds with one another. In the video introduction, Mourey asks, “am I the type of 33 year old lady that can wear a fake ponytail and fake bangs? Or am I the type of 33 year old lady that wears flannel shirts with toothpaste on them? Maybe I can be both!”⁴⁶⁶ Contrasting her age with the messy authenticity of toothpaste-ridden flannel shirts suggests that 33 year old ladies should give

⁴⁶⁴ Zoe Glatt and Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Productive Ambivalence, Economies of Visibility, and the Political Potential of Feminist YouTubers,” in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, eds. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 48.

⁴⁶⁵ Sarah Banet Weiser, “‘I’m Beautiful the Way I am’: Empowerment, Beauty, and Aesthetic Labor,” in *Aesthetic Labour: Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, eds. Ana Sofia Elias et al (McMillan Publisher Ltd, 2017), 267.

⁴⁶⁶ Jenna Mourey, “Making Clip in Bangs *Work* For Me,” YouTube, January 29, 2020, video, 15:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RoV0KaJoLc>.

up on their glamorous, sparkly pasts and perform domestic labor away from the public eye. To put it bluntly, Mourey reveals an implicit belief that, past their 20s, women have expired from the height of their sexual desirability. A binaristic response to this belief might be to either chase youth with luxury makeup and surgical procedures or to give up cosmetic play altogether. Mourey rejects this binary way of thinking by negotiating two disparate roles.

“Unsubscribe Below”: Flouting YouTube’s Industrial Conventions

Perhaps most akin to the “olden days” of Jenna Marbles is Mourey’s parodic take on YouTube’s industrial conventions. Following standard conventions of parody, Mourey references original sources, yet distances herself from them. However, unlike Mourey’s original content, her regular tête-à-têtes with Julien add another dimension of industrial critique. Julien will often chime in with an exaggerated statement about false sponsorships, ads, or merchandise, to which Jenna will dismiss. In other words, Julien articulates the overt commercialization of a seemingly amateur space and Mourey responds with resistance. On rare occasions, they flip the script and Julien becomes the naysayer to Mourey’s exaggerated claims.

Increasingly common forms of monetization on YouTube videos are mid-roll ads and sponsorships. Mid-roll ads are advertisements that appear throughout the duration of the video. They allow content creators to generate more income than if they were to just include pre-roll ads. Sponsorships are business agreements with brands: content creators promote the companies’ products in exchange for either a set dollar amount or a percentage of sales. One facet of Mourey’s channel that challenges platform trends is that she does not do any sponsorships. She rejects sponsorship deals due to the importance of trust and authenticity on YouTube—viewers

want to know “it’s really you” on screen.⁴⁶⁷ While she does monetize some of her videos, she opts out of mid-roll ads.

Mourey and Julien’s exchanges are comedic, but underneath the surface is an observation about YouTube’s commercialized trajectory. When Mourey dyes Julien’s beard with “Just for Men” dye, they start to question if they’ve accidentally dyed his skin. Julien looks directly at the camera and yells, “we’ll find out, after this mid-roll ad!” Mourey immediately responds, “stop, I’m not putting any mid-roll ads in.”⁴⁶⁸ Julien breaks the fourth wall and notes something about the pacing of YouTube videos: they are increasingly moving towards television networks’ pacing of story lines to place moments of suspense before the ad break, and resolution afterwards. YouTube positions itself as an alternative to mainstream media, claiming that it hosts videos of real people doing real life. With financial gain at stake, however, content creators start to rearrange the documentation of their lives according to the demands of the attention economy. Adding narrative structures aligned with mainstream media keeps an air of suspense in one’s supposedly unedited, unfiltered lives. This results in what Alice Marwick calls “an edited self”—an entrepreneur who brands and neatly packages their identity into a consumable, easily digestible product.⁴⁶⁹

Julien continues this exaggerated performance in Mourey’s “Get Ready With Me to Go Nowhere,” yet adds a dimension of gendered critique while doing so. While Mourey gets ready in the center of the frame, Julien is in the background rummaging through products, trying to get the camera to focus on him, and commenting on Mourey’s routine. In essence, he is generally

⁴⁶⁷ Larry King, “Jenna Marbles Chats #SexualWednesday, Kermit the Dog and ‘Smosh: The Movie,’” YouTube, December 2, 2017, video, 26:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9dj5WjFJFU>.

⁴⁶⁸ Jenna Mourey, “A Relaxing Time With Just For Men,” YouTube, March 7th, 2019, video, 15:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFU8plUZccs>.

⁴⁶⁹ Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, & Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 194.

wreaking havoc. When Mourey asks what he does to get ready, Julien responds, “me? So for my GRWM I usually like to wash my face and then maybe put a little bit of mustache wax or beard oil in my facial hair...then I slap myself a couple times...then I brush one tooth at a time, then I leave.”⁴⁷⁰ Julien flouts several conventions in his statement. First, he enters a gendered space as a clear outsider. The beauty community largely consists of women. More men are entering the beauty community, but they are often gay men with exaggerated performances of flamboyancy. Julien is a straight, cisgender man with ostensibly little knowledge of beauty product or technique. Second, Julien verbally says the letters “GRWM.” The “Get Ready With Me” genre is an established one in the beauty space, but the letters are written, never stated, respectively. By stating—and placing emphasis on—each letter, the statement sounds off and Julien’s outsider status is reinforced. Third, Julien includes ridiculous, painstakingly slow elements in his routine, using exaggeration to mirror the absurdly perfectionistic (and aspirational) morning routines that gain visibility on YouTube. In any given GRWM video, it is common to see subjects wake up at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning, drink green smoothies, exercise, meditate, read, and journal, all before a day’s work. Of course, for most, this morning routine is impossible. Yet it upholds a neoliberal ethos of personal responsibility for success, using aspirationality to sell the narrative. Julien’s routine is also impossible, but it is not aspirational, thus mirroring and deconstructing the absurdism masquerading as aspirationality present in “GRWM” videos. Julien’s role in this video also illuminates the deeply gendered implications of aspirational lifestyle content. Digital lifestyle content is largely dominated by women, thus drawing a connection between conspicuous consumption and femininity. Drawing on Mourey’s playfully absurd performance, Julien’s mere presence in this feminized space is coded as absurd. This dynamic suggests that it

⁴⁷⁰ Jenna Mourey, “Get Ready With Me to Go Nowhere,” YouTube, April 1, 2020, video, 15:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNuurt3mpr8>.

is not just women who are called on to be models of aspirationality: it is women who enact traditional feminine roles who hold this kind of space on YouTube.

Just as aspirationality is a core tenet of visible beauty videos, inspiration is commonly used in the beauty space. Phrases like “don’t be afraid to be yourself,” and “do what makes you feel beautiful” pervade YouTube. This reliance on positive affect is in keeping with the postfeminist ethos of seeking happiness and positivity.⁴⁷¹ Much like Julien’s above absurdist statements, Mourey pairs an established YouTube convention—in this case, inspiration—with a ridiculous twist. In “Giving Myself an E-Girl Makeover,” Mourey admits her preconceived notion that she thought e-girls were girl who played e-sports. After learning that is not the case, Mourey wonders if they are just girls who go to Radio Shack. She then jokes that the video is sponsored by Radio Shack. At the end of the video, Mourey reveals her complete e-girl look, which includes pigtails, cat ears, overdone blush, and face gems. She states, “I hope that this video inspires you, regardless of your age and gender, whatever you look like, to go out there and just go to Radio Shack.”⁴⁷² Much like in her Claire’s makeover video, Mourey continues to encourage confidence to wear and do whatever one wants. The twist here is Mourey’s pairing of inspiration and imagined sponsorships. In the beauty community, successful sponsorships—meaning sponsorships that do not upset or anger viewers—often have an affective element to them. Beauty gurus will link inspiring messages to their brand deals. Of course, Mourey’s inspirational message is clunky, thus revealing the artifice in connecting consumption with liberation. There is no viable connection between Radio Shack and confidence, which in turn reveals the constructed nature of connecting inspiration with Hello Fresh or Bite Beauty.

⁴⁷¹ Kai Prins and Mariah Wellman, “Dodging Negativity Like It’s My Job: Marketing Postfeminist Positivity Through Beachbody Fitness on Instagram,” *Feminist Media Studies* (2021): 1-17.

⁴⁷² Jenna Mourey, “Giving Myself an E-Girl Makeover,” YouTube, January 29, 2020, video, 14:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYowCBOR2SI>.

Mourey further reveals the constructed nature of YouTube sponsorships through an imagined sponsorship with Top Ramen. In “I Gave Myself Those Awful Ramen Nails,” Mourey gives herself a fake set of nails using crushed up ramen noodles. While the endeavor is not necessarily a failure, Mourey bemoans the fact that it actually worked—her nails look good, even though they are covered in ramen. Parodying the fact that Top Ramen likely does not imagine their customer base using their product in this manner, Mourey jokes, “I’m snatched, thanks to Top Ramen. They always be keeping me looking my best. This video is sponsored by Top Ramen.” This time Julien acts as the skeptical naysayer, resulting in the following interaction:

Julien: “No it’s not [sponsored by Top Ramen].”

Mourey: “Yes it is. We also shot a video with Top Ramen; click up here.”

Julien: “I don’t see it.”

Mourey: “Maybe they haven’t uploaded it yet.”⁴⁷³

Again, the absurdity of the prospect paired with viewer knowledge that Mourey does not take sponsorships makes it clear that the video is not actually sponsored by Top Ramen. These fake sponsorships are a running joke on Mourey’s channel, as we see in the prior Radio Shack example. Yet she takes this fake sponsorship a step further and demonstrates the labor of exchange that is present in brand deals. In this case, exchange comes from collaborations in which two content creators appear on one another’s channel. This exchange is not economic, but instead is an exchange of social capital: one content creator’s subscribers are exposed to another content creator. Not every sponsorship has a collaboration of this nature, but collaborations are common strategies that content creators use to accrue audience attention. They require a great

⁴⁷³ Jenna Mourey, “I Gave Myself Those Awful Ramen Nails,” YouTube, July 11th, 2019, video, 17:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FPROLM3PMg>.

deal of time, resources, and existing social capital. Mourey's fake collaboration with Top Ramen draws attention to the fact that she does not do collaborations online.

Perhaps the most egregious violation of YouTube's conventions is Mourey's repeated reminders for her viewers to "unsubscribe below." This statement mirrors content creators' calls for viewers to subscribe to their channel by clicking on the red "subscribe" button below the video. Ever since the "bell" feature was introduced on YouTube, content creators urge their subscribers to "hit that bell so [they] never miss another upload." This call to action adheres to YouTube's attention economy in which clicks, likes, views, and shares, are all forms of currency in the digital sphere. The more eyeballs a content creator gets on their videos, the more likely YouTube is to recommend those videos to users. Subscriptions are valuable tools in YouTube's attention economy, as subscriptions connote long term loyalty to a channel's brand.⁴⁷⁴ It is common for YouTubers to remind their viewers to subscribe in the closing of each video. In response to her failure and absurd content, Mourey turns this convention on its head by directing her viewers away from her videos. This directive does not actually turn her viewers away; in fact, her continuously high view count suggests that Mourey has a loyal fanbase that actively seeks out her weekly videos. So, instead of trying to get her viewers to *do* something, this call to unsubscribe seems to symbolically reveal something about YouTube's attention economy. YouTube is not simply a space for content creators and viewers alike to hang out; it is a platform for content creators to gain attention from viewers. There is an exchange: entertaining content warrants a subscription.

⁴⁷⁴ Florencia Garcia-Rapp, "Popularity Markers on YouTube's Attention Economy: the Case of Bubzbeauty," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 2 (2017): 234.

Conclusion

There are contradictions in the observation that Mourey has matured beyond parody in some respects and still clings onto parody in others. I argue that Mourey's evolution beyond parody is in part a response to her aging outside of postfeminist conventions of beauty. In her early content, Mourey parodied white, western beauty norms through exaggerated performance of femininity because, at the time, she was the pinnacle of these norms. She was visibly young and strikingly thin. She could parody these norms so well because she could simultaneously achieve them. As Mourey started to age out of hegemonic norms of "successful" femininity, her online strategy had to change. Mourey took her failure to achieve a youthful, natural, and effortlessly feminine presentation in her own hands and molded it into a cultural critique. In both kinds of performances, Mourey critiqued gender norms, yet her change in strategy to critique those norms further reveal the ephemeral nature of successful femininity. Here, we see something of a paradox: by exaggerating her failure, her age, and her inability to do "natural" beauty, Mourey humorously pointed to all the reasons she should be irrelevant. By doing so through humor and play, she stayed relevant online. Indeed, it was her own self-cancellation that ended Mourey's visibility online, rather than a slow and painful aging out of the platform.

Because Mourey is so quantitatively successful as a YouTuber, she is able to use parody to critique YouTube's industrial norms. She does not need the sponsorships, the collaborations, or the mid-roll ads to be visible online. She generated an impressive subscriber base before the height of YouTube's popularity, and with that, she has a degree of privilege on the platform. As such, she can distance herself from contemporary demands of the attention economy. This parody also functions as a critique of the increased commercialization of YouTube's platform. For content creators who got a later start, they must utilize the aforementioned strategies to gain

visibility, which contradicts YouTube's democratizing ethos. It is ingrained in our minds that the attention economy is the metric of digital success. Gone are the days when content creators can simply "be themselves" with zero commercial imperative on YouTube—at least with any hope of having an audience.

Mourey's performance is full of contradictions, ambivalence, and negotiation of norms. In contrast to women beauty gurus who enact a clean and cohesive self-brand, Mourey's contradictions reflect the messiness of humanity that we all share. At times, she does reify postfeminist, neoliberal norms of positive affect, empowerment, and self-improvement. At the same time, however, her exaggerated, playful failure reveals implicit norms that pervade YouTube's attention economy. Many of these industrial norms intersect with hegemonic gendered expectations, thus Mourey provides a feminist critique that is grounded in humor. Of course, humorous feminist critique is not unique to Mourey, yet her complex negotiation with parody suggests that play can be a powerful tool in revealing and challenging inequitable social norms.

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Conclusion: A New Era of Digital Transgression?

For the most part, the beauty gurus in this dissertation do not brand themselves as explicitly feminist or oriented towards social justice. With the exception of Nappyheadedjoba, an initial glance at these YouTubers might suggest that these are relatively normative content creators whose visibility strategies are aligned with the postfeminist, neoliberal subject. We cannot ignore that, in some respects, these YouTubers do reinforce hegemonic norms. Indeed, two of the women in this dissertation reflect powerful social privilege: they are white, cisgender, upper-middle class women in heterosexual relationships. While Nappyheadedjoba's channel is more explicit in her transgressive aims, she has noted having relative privilege in her schooling. Additionally, her moderate success on YouTube and active Patreon page afford her upward mobility, thus resulting in class privilege. It is also worth noting that subverting YouTube's industrial conventions may not be top of mind on a platform with increasing conditions of precarity and stringent monetization policies. Indeed, given the fact that only 3% of content creators can sustain a living from their digital activity, achieving visibility, however capitalist-affirming it may be, is often the top priority among YouTubers.⁴⁷⁵

My intervention comes from the observation that despite these industrial constraints, particularly on marginalized content creators, beauty YouTubers are not entirely removed from feminist, transgressive potential. Existing scholarship on the radical potential on YouTube largely focuses on "LeftTube," or "BreadTube," which is the leftist side of the platform.⁴⁷⁶ As Glatt and Banet-Weiser note, one visibility strategy that transformational feminist YouTubers

⁴⁷⁵ Zoe Glatt and Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Productive Ambivalence, Economies of Visibility, and the Political Potential of Feminist YouTubers," in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, eds. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

⁴⁷⁶ Kelly Cotter, "Practical Knowledge of Algorithms: The Case Of BreadTube," *New Media & Society* (2022):1-20.

employ is promoting their crowdfunding sources like Venmo or Patreon. While migration to Patreon is a viable survival strategy for marginalized content creators, theorizing crowdfunding use as a primary transformational feminist tactic obscures the transgressive potential on the platform of YouTube itself. As such, my dissertation uncovers the playful, multilayered, and algorithmically unthreatening forms of resistance against the very platform on which creators earn their incomes.

The digital beauty community is not known for its social justice commitments. In fact, the community generates visibility due to its natural connection to advertisers. Consumer groups are easily curated in the beauty space, as cosmetics is an overwhelmingly female, young, white, and middle-class industry. On the one hand, this digital genre invites professionalization and visibility of feminized labor. However, this also raises the stakes of the community. Explicitly unveiling the oppressive ideologies that undergird YouTube's logics would be a death sentence to an already precarious career. Thus, sometimes subversion must be incorporated into identity performance that seemingly aligns with postfeminist, neoliberal norms. In other words, it must be hidden to those in power.

The subversion that I amplify in my dissertation does not fundamentally disrupt norms of authenticity, intimacy, or feminized labor. Indeed, RawBeautyKristi ultimately expresses her undying love of being a mother and attributes her fans' loyalty to her success. Nappyheadedjojoba uses vernacular that is not just recognizable to YouTube audiences, but *white* YouTube audiences. Jenna Marbles's content is riddled with self-deprecation, a notably feminine trait. Yet at the same time, RawBeautyKristi demonstrates how much the affective demand for positivity among mothers alienates her not just from her audience, but from her commitment to being an honest, authentic YouTuber. Nappyheadedjojoba uses algorithmically-

friendly language to offset her incriminating accounts of white supremacy, police violence, and apathy towards intersectional social justice efforts. And Jenna Marbles's self-deprecation, when closely analyzed, reveals something not about herself, but about the impossibility of longevity on a platform that punishes aging women.

Aligning with scholarship that disrupts the narrative of YouTube as a democratizing platform, my dissertation highlights the sociotechnical conventions in the beauty community that discipline content creators. YouTube's attention economy necessitates visibility. Social media logics turn the threat of surveillance on its head; now, the marked threat of invisibility urges digital content creators to curate their self presentation in ways that make them visible through YouTube's algorithmically-run recommendation system. In other words, successfully gaming the algorithm is the mark of a successful influencer. For all content creators, regardless of identity category, generating visibility necessitates performing the neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject. Performing the risk-taking, self-actualized, independent subject who succeeds against all odds is more likely to be disseminated by the platform, viewed, shared by viewers, and monetized. These qualities are often associated with masculinity, which suggests the overwhelming popularity of male content creators online.

Performing the entrepreneurial subject works in conjunction with performing microcelebrity online. Unlike their mainstream celebrity counterparts, microcelebrities become popular due to their ordinariness. In an almost paradoxical relationship, audiences revere microcelebrities for being just like them. As such, recognizable claims to authenticity and intimacy are paramount for the digital content creator. Notable digital performances of authenticity and intimacy are through middle-classness, visibly amateur content, integration of linguistic or aesthetic faux-pas, confessional culture, and direct address to audiences. As

previously stated, the case studies in this dissertation adhere to these listed social norms on YouTube. As such, at face value, they are algorithmically safe and unthreatening.

To achieve and sustain visibility online, women content creators must navigate gendered dynamics. Much of the aspirational labor that informs women's identity performance is feminized: they must engage affect (confessional culture is particularly evident among women content creators), they must perform relational labor with their audience through the big sister/best friend roles, and must make their brands legible through consumption. On top of it all, women content creators must do this while communicating happiness, fulfillment, aspirationality, and balance. Despite popular feminism's embrace of the circulation and formalization of feminized labor, it is still disproportionately uncompensated and is an additional hurdle women must confront in the social media space. These added layers to YouTube's attention economy make women's visibility, much less transgressive visibility, exceedingly difficult.

The case studies that I have introduced in chapters 2, 3, and 4 are not meant to be a prescriptive "how to" guide for women content creators who seek to challenge the oppressive structures of YouTube. Instead, they are meant to serve as a roadmap for the possibilities of feminist resistance in a commercial space. Highlighting these tactics offers tools that are at the disposal of other women in the digital beauty sphere. Additionally, it provides a framework for audiences to engage in resistive readings of YouTube beauty videos, which they can then disseminate through tools like the comments section.

Chapter 2 suggests that performance of negative affect—something that generates high visibility on YouTube—need not always be aligned with hegemonic femininity. Pairing negative affect with motherhood can illuminate the competing demands and expectations that social

media audiences have on mothers. RawBeautyKristi disrupts neoliberalism's emphasis on individual psychology by attributing her breakdowns to the lack of systemic support in place for mothers. Here, she invokes Marxist conceptions of alienation, noting that her audience's incessant demand for her to be happy alienates herself from her work as a YouTuber. Furthermore, her role as a mother is counter to the rapid temporal rhythm at which beauty YouTubers are expected to work.

Chapter 3 highlights the possibilities of aligning "GRWM" videos with leftist political commentary. Nappyheadedjojoba's creative use of beauty vernacular familiarizes radical politics for a largely white audience who may not be initially interested in social justice work. This use of cosmetic vocabulary does not dilute her radical messaging; it contextualizes the importance of social justice efforts for viewers who may not have grown up in poverty or experienced embodied trauma by witnessing yet another act of police violence against a Black body. Here, I demonstrate how performing intimacy through relatability can be a radical act despite its normative origins on the platform.

Chapter 4 shows how women's performance of failure challenges disciplinary conceptualizations of success. Jenna Marbles's failure is funny and entertaining, yet it is also a damning account of the disposability of the aging woman on YouTube. Showing that trying to purchase aspirational lifestyles is an ultimately fruitless task through comedy layers industrial critique in recognizable performance of femininity: self-deprecation. In a postfeminist lens, Mourey's failure is individual. A transgressive lens indicates that Mourey's failure identifies systemic failings YouTube's disciplining of femininity under the guise of choice and empowerment.

There are limitations to the transgressive potential of visible YouTubers in the beauty space. *Making do* within a system is a powerful tool for people in marginalized positions. In fact, it is a form of resistance popularized by cultural studies scholars.⁴⁷⁷ However, working within a system gets complicated by the fact that content creators ultimately profit off of the system. On YouTube's attention economy, the more visibility a content creator generates, the more money they receive. What's more, the financial earnings of YouTubers are famously obscured, which creates a power imbalance between content creators and their fans.

In light of popular feminism, expressly gendered critiques tend to do better on the platform. Despite the fact that popular feminism sustains (and is circulated by) hegemonic structures, the seeming embrace of feminism that has occurred in the past decade makes the word and its commitments less threatening on social media platforms. With that, the possibilities of intersectional feminism are limited on YouTube. Class consciousness is not popular in the beauty community. While the precarity of YouTubers and poverty of some consumers is occasionally discussed, the exploitation of others involved in the beauty community is still obscured. In fact, the working conditions of those who create the very products that beauty YouTubers purchase and use were entirely left out of the case studies' content.

The Future of YouTube Activism

In January of 2023, famous TikTok beauty guru Mikayla Nogueira became the subject of a public scandal. She had a brand deal with L'Oréal and posted a video with one of their mascara products. She stated that the product "looks like false lashes," exhibiting amazement and awe at the results.⁴⁷⁸ Shortly thereafter, viewers noticed that Nogueira was wearing false eyelashes

⁴⁷⁷ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁴⁷⁸ Mikayla Nogueira, "THESE ARE THE LASHES OF MY DREAMS!," TikTok, January 24, 2023, video, 0:44, <https://www.tiktok.com/@mikaylanogueira/video/7192357598744759598?lang=en>.

throughout the ad. While the “paid partnership” caption was in the TikTok, viewers could only find that information by clicking “see more” on the caption. Following this video, Nogueira then became the face of false advertising on TikTok. With that, beauty YouTubers came forward in droves to discuss the problem with TikTok’s social norms, monetization practices, and lack of adherence to the Federal Trade Commission’s regulations.

To some, Nogueira’s scandal might seem like just another beauty community scandal, which is not surprising for a community that generates engagement through in fighting. However, RawBeautyKristi’s response to the scandal presents the potential for a radical future on beauty YouTube. Her 2023 video, “We Need to Talk About False Advertising and Why You *Should* Care” explicitly names and critiques capitalism: “you aren’t just a consumer, but in the eyes of capitalism, yes you are. You are a consumer and you are someone that’s being advertised to constantly... advertisements are everywhere.” She goes on to say, “federal minimum wage is \$7.25. A mascara, we’ll use that as an example, might be \$14. That is 2 hours of work for somebody. If they are taking your recommendation, thinking that A) it’s not sponsored, or B) the truth, you would hope, because you can’t lie in these campaigns, according to the FTC...if somebody goes out and buys a product based on your recommendation, it doesn’t perform on them the way that it did on you because the ad was misleading, that’s a problem.”⁴⁷⁹ Here, RawBeautyKristi’s critiques of hegemonic structures are not couched in brand-friendly language. She does not allude to or hide the damaging effects of for-profit platforms. Yet with 150,000 views, this video was widely viewed and disseminated. In fact, it caught my eye as one of the first videos recommended to me when I logged onto YouTube. Of course, while YouTube’s

⁴⁷⁹ RawBeautyKristi, “We Need to Talk About False Advertising & Why You *Should* Care,” YouTube, February 3, 2023, video, 21:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H88wSsdui-s>.

algorithm does take previous viewing practices into account, this finding still suggests that folks who regularly watch beauty content will pretty readily be able to find this video.

So what changed? Did YouTube's algorithm become more hospitable to radical content? While YouTube's algorithm remains black-boxed, we can reasonably assume that is likely not the case. Is it the fact that RawBeautyKristi, an already popular YouTuber, has the privilege of social capital to then call "2023 [her] year of not giving a fuck what people think"? That privilege certainly configures into her identity performance. Yet what is most notable about the case of lash gate is that it is on TikTok. With declining numbers and perceptions of "stale" content, YouTube is no longer the dominant video-sharing platform.⁴⁸⁰ Despite the case that some make about YouTube's lack of contemporary relevance, I suggest that YouTube's struggle in light of TikTok makes it all the more relevant. The transgressive possibilities on YouTube expand, since content creators can explicitly name and call out oppressive social media logics without calling attention to themselves and the platforms on which they work. Viewing social media users as consumers is a ubiquitous phenomenon across social media platforms. YouTubers who call out this dynamic on their home platform are likely to get obscured. Yet now, YouTube's chief competitor is the face of this issue.

It is worth noting that Kristi's critique of lash gate is not entirely resistive. Pitting competitors against one another, is after all, a fundamental element of free-market capitalism. In some ways, Kristi acts as an ambassador of YouTube and framing the platform as morally superior to TikTok. Yet at the same time, Kristi uses this case to discuss sponsorship deals on YouTube. Following her explanation that brands have asked her to make her advertisement disclosures ambiguous (to which she has refused), Kristi argues that viewers should not trust

⁴⁸⁰ Tiffany Ferg, "Why Does YouTube Feel So Lackluster and Stale Right Now?|Internet Analysis," YouTube, June 23, 2022, video, 33:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKgrSDq1c78&t=292s>.

everything that influencers say—herself included. While this statement may, ironically, make Kristi seem *more* trustworthy to her viewers, it also sheds to light the dynamics of beauty YouTube that complicate claims to authenticity and intimacy.

Ultimately, YouTubers will always have to compete for visibility. They will always have to work within the constraints of a for-profit platform. Drawing attention to the disparities in gender, race, and class on a platform that privileges economies of visibility is not a radical project. Ultimately, it is my hope that we will one day break free from the systems of capitalism, white supremacy, and the patriarchy. Yet, inevitably, we must exist alongside these systemic injustices. My aim is to provide a glimmer of hope that we may playfully transgress while working within the system. These tools are not just for the beauty YouTuber—I hope that they may be useful for all those who face increasing conditions of precarity: entrepreneurs, factory workers, teachers, mothers, graduate students, those who feel hopeless fighting a seemingly impenetrable system.

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