Verified: Surfacing the Relationship Between Social Media Influencers and Emotional Capital

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VERIFIED: SURFACING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND EMOTIONAL CAPITAL

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

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Abstract

Motivated by my own complicated and confusing relationship with social media, this thesis seeks to track and surface the dynamics of social media fame through case studies of certain “influencers”. Drawing on scholarship about capital and social performance, this work intends to deconstruct the narrative of social media as a democratic marketplace to share and consume content. Using data from six main case study subjects along with research regarding the structural mechanisms for celebrity production in the context of social media, I construct an understanding of social media celebrity as being intimately connected to the flow of capital, especially “emotional capital” (Cottingham, 2016). Additionally, I explore how structures of inequality, upheld by processes of celebrity production, impact an “influencers” ability to access capital conversion. In completing this work, I hope to demystify the dynamics behind our relationship with internet fame.

Keywords: emotional capital, emotional labor, affective labor, influencer, social media, social performance
Dedicated to…

Young people who are concerned about their online relevance.
Do not give it more power than it already has.
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INTRODUCTION

In my junior year of high school in 2016, I became friends with a fellow classmate of mine who I will refer to as Rita. Rita was making these short, 6-second, comedy videos and posting them on an app that was at the time reaching its peak of popularity, Vine. In the span of a few months, she had amassed thousands of followers. Folks from our school were recognizing her as the “Vine girl.” One week, some manager flew out from Los Angeles and they signed a contract; soon, she was earning far more money off of social media than our jobs at the local pizza shop brought us.

When Rita would post a photo with me on her Instagram, my own follower count grew to include folks I had never met before, but who had some conception of my life due to my association with her. Admittedly, I began to care about this, about having strangers believe something about my life, certainly that it was more interesting than the sort of regular, suburban experience I was having. Rita and I grew apart, left for different schools, and Vine was discontinued. Still, I can open up Instagram or TikTok and see hundreds of Ritas, each constructing a particular performance.

Even though I do not make as earnest an attempt as I once did to have an online presence, I still spend hours and hours scrolling through social media, usually stopping on the profile of some skinny, conventionally attractive woman and mining her posts for an understanding of her life. Where does she travel? What products does she use? What does she eat? How does she workout? How might I be able to make alterations to myself in order to fit this object of aspiration? The reality is that these individuals, those who have gained celebrity in the online
space, are able to mobilize folks. This past summer, prominent social media personalities felt compelled to share information on how to get involved with fundraising campaigns related to #BlackLivesMatter, saying things like “I want to use my platform for good.” “Influencers”, as they are referred to, know that they have power over setting cultural taste, establishing online discourses, promoting ideas and products. The posts they make have material implications outside of the online space.

Moreover, social media instills in many of us an idea that we could be in these positions of influence too. It seems like all one would have to do would be to download a social media app and start posting. In truth, that is exactly what Rita did. Stories like Rita’s inform our understanding of social media as an open and free marketplace for the exchanging of ideas and, increasingly, the production of celebrity. I have chosen to examine this narrative with the awareness that few if any opportunities in our society are truly “free”. My work focuses on a series of essential questions regarding influencers:

1. What types of influencers exist in this online space?
2. How do they gain access to celebrity?
3. How do they grow such a loyal following?
4. How do they have helped shape social media into a highly profitable business?
5. How is the space of social media fame shaped by and responding to dynamics of inequality existent across western society?

Many young people consider the prospect of being an influencer to be a legitimate career. This work seeks to move past the impulse to simply refer to these folks as the “Me Generation” or some such other reductionist discourse around social media. Whether we like it or not, post modern capitalism has created conditions where this form of influence is highly
valuable. I believe it is important to make the landscape of social media fame legible in a way that is honest about dynamics of exclusion and inaccessibility.

CHAPTER 1: GETTING GROUNDED IN THE IDEA OF SOCIAL MEDIA FAME ACROSS DIMENSIONS OF CAPITAL AND SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

In an effort to understand social media fame and the dynamics contained within the social label of the “influencer”, I have built a theoretical framework that borrows valuable insight from a number of theorists. In this first chapter, I lay out the theories that have informed the sociological lens through which I explore this topic.

The first two concepts that have assisted me in the formation of theory around social media fame are emotional and affective labor. Arlie Hochschild (2003) coined the term emotional labor in her book entitled The Managed Heart, in which she explores emotional labor as a form of labor that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others. [...] This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality,” (Hochschild, pg. 7). Hochschild contextualizes this analysis in a study of flight attendants and the manner in which their jobs require the ability to manage others’ emotional experiences through their affect and personal aesthetic arrangement. She further explains that this labor is a form of “deep acting” in that there is less separation from the validation one gets from their performance and their personal sense of validation.
Hochschild, in her study, tends to focus largely on the embodied cost of emotional labor, such as flight attendants being required to form their bodies to the aesthetic ideals of the airline’s conception of a glamorous and romantic in-air experience or a care worker experiencing the death of a client.

In order to capture more of an analysis of the emotional management of others on the part of the worker, I also engage Michael Hardt’s analysis of affective labor. Hardt (1999) explains that affective labor is a central component of postmodernization, “in which providing services and manipulating information are at the heart of economic production” (Hardt, pg 90). Hardt goes on to explain that the kinds of labor we are producing closely mirror the processing of a computer, in as much as “artificial intelligence allows the computer to expand and perfect its operation based on interaction with its user and its environment” (1999, pg. 94). Individuals and groups are able to do this by using their social knowledge to finetune their activity and communication, making themselves the most optimized for social networks. Hardt explains that this labor is immaterial, “even if it is corporeal and affective; in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion-- even as sense of connectedness or community” (1999, pg. 96). Those doing affective labor seek to manage and manipulate the emotional experiences of others, drawing them closer to their service. In many ways that is what we are all doing when we engage in social media: constructing a self that produces positive emotions in others. When, in the context of my research, I evoke the terms emotional or affective labor, I am referring to an influencer’s effort to stir up these intangible feelings in their viewership. This can be witnessed in the intense efforts to create an aesthetically pleasing experience for viewers on certain influencer’s Instagram accounts or YouTube channels as well as thanking viewers for watching their videos and even expressing love for them.
Additionally, as Hardt points out, because this labor is elevated to the level of human relations, it is also entirely dominated by access to internal capital (1999, pg. 96). This means that an influencer’s ability to effectively perform affective labor rests largely upon their access to other kinds of capital: social, cultural or economic. I will expand upon these concepts later in this chapter.

I am not attempting to liken social media stars to care workers more generally, as folks who work in congregate care settings, childcare, nursing and other care-based professions are uniquely exploited in this dynamic and do not have access to the kinds of capital that is produced from their labor. Social media influencers, I argue, do gain access to capital as a result of this affective and emotional labor due to the parasocial relationships they have with their fans, resulting in fans’ reliance on their emotional products. Through this process, influencers gain access to emotional capital, defined by Marci D. Cottingham (2016) as “a tripartite concept composed of emotion-based knowledge, management skills, and capacities to feel that links self-processes and resources to group membership and social location” (pg. 452). I will be using the term emotional capital in the context of social media influencers to express their ability to use these three pillars of Cottingham’s conception in order to gain a favorable social position within the vast landscape of social media.

The most central means of converting affective labor into emotional capital is through the leveraging of parasocial relationships between influencers and fans. Meng Tao, Hamza Kaka Adbul Wahab, and Jashim Khan conducted a study among young women in China using the social media platforms Sina Weibo, QQ, RenRen, Youku and WeChat. This study, published in 2019, examines the relationship between fans and social media influencers by investigating “(a) the mediating role of numbers of hours enthusiast spent interacting with celebrities and (b) the
moderating role of celebrity identification in the relationship between social media celebrity
effect and para-social relationship” (2019, pg. 828). The authors of this study defined
parasocial relationships as, “one sided relationships established by followers of a celebrity with
the celebrity not being aware of the relationship. Para-social relationship brings about intimate
relationships which are perceived by an individual to have with media celebrities” (2019, pg.
830). Ultimately, this study found that there is a significant relationship between social media
influencers and the para-social relationship built by their fans as a result of the amount of hours
spent on social media. Tao, Wahab, and Khan surmise that this data suggests that marketers and
businesses can make use of social media influencers as promotion tools, leveraging this para-
social relationship. While I have found the prediction regarding awareness among marketing
agencies of the power of these relationships, I also argue that social media influencers are
intensely aware of their fans’ conception of proximity to them. I couple this understanding of
para-social relationships and their power with the argument that social media influencers make
use of what I will be referring to as emotional capital to strengthen them.

Ashley Mears, in her book entitled Very Important People, offers us critical analysis of
the flow of capital across a space designated as exclusive and aspirational, the global VIP
nightclub scene. This study is incredibly helpful in understanding the embodied capital that
proves essential in womens’ access to elite, aspirational spaces. The “girls” (mostly models),
invited out by club promoters to entice wealthy men into spending large amounts of money on
VIP tables and bottle service, are the currency that men (the clients and promoters alike) use to
express and gauge power. I find this study useful in the deconstruction of social media fame as a
new form of more democratic fame. In other words, the scene of social media influencers is still
an elite space like any other in a western context, one that upholds and reproduces inequality.
Due to the adherence to the traditional structures of Hollywood celebrity production, such as management agencies, influencers are largely judged based upon their selling potential, much like the women sought out to accompany wealthy men at the tables Mears observed. Mears highlights a dynamic in her study on the global VIP night club circuit that applies well to the similarly exclusive space of top influencers:

“In a supposedly post- feminist world, equality is talked about as a matter of individual rights and access. But empowerment is never an individual project, and the pleasures that empower girls as objects of men’s desire produce hierarchies among women who are ranked in a value system according to men’s perceptions of their worth […] Those girls [how models are referred to when they are invited to a club to accompany a wealthy client] deemed pretty enough to be at the center of the most exclusive parties in the world were still outsiders, always adjacent to the real power concentrated in men’s hands” (Mears, 2020, pg. 147).

The idea that social media is a new democratic market place for the more equitable and authentic production of celebrity is tied to the misunderstanding of individuals’ access as equality. Regardless of how far from the norm an individual creator appears to deviate, in order to become an influencer they must mostly adhere to some set of aspiration standard(s). These are the aspects that allow them to be tools for marketing, to set taste, to help grow a market. These calculations of worth are made behind the scenes in order to uphold the illusion of authentic connection. Without making these calculations of worth explicit, the system for the production of internet celebrity can reproduce inequalities under the guise of a free market for content.

Although I find Mears’ study of aesthetic capital incredibly helpful in understanding the flow of capital in elite contexts, I want to offer a critique of the confines in which Mears places
her analysis. The women she considers to be holding the most aesthetic capital are thin, tall, model-like white women, asserting that this is the way to gain access to aesthetic capital. This understanding erases the myriad aesthetics with which this kind of capital can be gained. An aesthetic, after all, is a kind of arrangement. Gamer YouTube and Twitch streams, for example, contain aesthetics that do not mirror those of the women considered most valuable on the VIP scene, but that does not mean that they do not have an audience or rather a contingent of people who do find their arrangements pleasing, interesting, or otherwise valuable. This is critical to note as I continue, because not all influencers are tall, thin, blonde, and model-like, but are regardless incredibly effective at what they do and should not be considered exceptions to the rule.

In addition to the emotional capital, my research is informed by an understanding of the flow of other kinds of capital also deeply involved in the production of celebrity. Pierre Bourdieu writes on social and cultural capital in his piece *Forms of Capital*, analyzing these forms of capital as well as the essential understanding that different forms of capital are often transformed or converted between or among each other. Before I explain how each of the influencers I have written about share a particular, exclusive access to social and cultural capital, I want to briefly consider scarcity. Bourdieu explains that capital derives its value from scarcity, using the example of being able to read in a world in which illiteracy exists widely (Bourdieu, 1986, pg. 242). Bourdieu himself was writing about capital in an attempt to make sense of the education system as a space that, despite its proposed goal as being the ‘great equalizer’, ultimately serves to reproduce inequalities. I argue that a similar dynamic is occurring in the space of social media fame. Just like in the case of public education, anyone can establish an account on a social media platform and begin putting out content, however the content that is rewarded is ultimately
content that exemplifies a creator’s access to these different forms of capital that they are then able to convert into symbolic capital; that is being an identifiable, public figure. In regards to scarcity, it is not helpful to consider fan-viewership as the only measure that adds value to an influencer. In this case, one could argue that the amount of people on the internet as well as the different niches they choose to inhabit are so giant that anyone could have a sizable following if their content was interesting. As I have examined, this is not the full story; it is not only about fans, it is about representation (in terms of the management agencies which negotiate the careers of influencers), and brand relationships, and these are not accessible to just anyone.

Social capital, especially, is deeply essential in the establishment of legitimacy within the upper crest of social media fame. Bourdieu defined social capital as such:

“Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition-- or in other words, the membership in a group-- which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively- owned capital, a “credential” which entitled them to credit, in the various senses of the word,” (Bourdieu, 1986, pg. 248).

The case studies I am considering exemplify the value of relationships with other popular creators. Just as social capital supports the ability for celebrities to leverage symbolic capital, the inverse is also true. Take, for example, the verified check mark that appears next to particularly popular accounts on social media to establish that this account does in fact belong to the celebrity/public figure it appears to. This check mark, a tangible manifestation of symbolic capital, allows for celebrities to identify other celebrities, so that even if they do not personally know of someone, they at least are aware of their status. In a sea of direct messages from fans
and other normal people, a celebrity can quickly identify people who they can understand to be of similar social positioning. In this way, symbolic capital can also be a badge of legitimacy in the establishment of social relationships. As I have previously mentioned, the ability for influencers to convert emotional and affective labor into emotional capital relies heavily on their ability to access these other forms of capital.

Additionally, I will be considering the tension involved in social performance. If the change in forms of and possibilities for celebrity is seen as a progression from silver screen actors, to reality TV stars, and eventually to popular social media content creators, then the gap between what the audience sees and who the celebrity is when the cameras turn off seemingly has been closing gradually over time. Despite this simplistic explanation of how social media has transformed celebrity, the experiences of social media fame of many popular content creators may tell a different story. In order to articulate the difference between a celebrity’s public and personal life--and to what degree that might be different for different kinds of social media fame--I will be making use of Erving Goffman’s concept of the performance of the self. I will also be utilizing Goffman’s adoption of certain dramaturgical terms for the same purpose.

Goffman (1956) acknowledges that we understand authentic performance of self to be one that is not purposefully constructed or consciously contrived, but rather a product of one’s unselfconscious response to a situation. On the other hand, we tend to see contrived performance as something “painstakingly pasted together” as there is not a situation to which such actions could be a natural response (pg. 70). This dichotomous understanding of performance, Goffman asserts, is in reality much more complex, arguing that “while persons usually are what they appear to be, such appearances could still have been managed” (1956, pg. 71). In this way, even authenticity itself is a performance. This assessment from Goffman supports the claim that the
increased perception of authenticity that is often associated with social media celebrities may not signify a genuine closing of the gap between the public and the private.

As I mentioned, Goffman makes use of a dramaturgical vocabulary to articulate the tensions intrinsic to this gap. The term “region” is used to describe a space bounded by “barriers of perception”. The shared understanding that comes from performance informs the audience’s experience of the space and conception of what kind of interaction that space encourages (Goffman, 1956, pg. 106). The term “front region” or “front stage” applies to the region in which the performance is given, while a “back stage” is defined as the space in which impressions actively fostered in the performance are commonly contradicted. In other words, this is the region in which the individual steps out of character (Goffman 1956, pgs. 107-112). While these categories span a wide range of social experience through space and time, the everyday life that Goffman is analyzing in this study is that of the late 1950s. The tightly bounded regions of a dinner party or office meeting do not appear to closely resemble the sprawling digital landscape of social media. Despite this lack of resemblance, I will argue that the performance of self has been carried into the digital space while also being exaggerated and even more difficult to discern the authenticity of.

In order to render the space of social media fame legible to the reader, I will be using Max Weber’s concept of ideal types. Through the use of this theory, I am able to construct ideal types of social media influencers from a combination of aspects. Hilliard Aronovitch clarifies the utility of ideal types as constructed, “not as an average of”, their instances, but by selecting and accenting elements such that it is then a matter ‘of determining in each individual case, the extent to

![Figure 1]
which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality…’ (Weber 1949, 90)” (Aronovitch, 2011, pg 357). I consider ideal types of influencers in order to draw out the avenues through which they achieve these levels of stardom. The axis upon which I am constructing these ideal types of influencers are, one, relatable to aspirational, and two, cringeworthy to beloved (refer to Figure 1).

My intervention in the conversation regarding social media fame is twofold. First, I will be tracing the ability of social media influencers to convert their performances of emotional labor and affective labor into emotional capital through their construction of an identity in the space of social media. Second, I will be exploring how the access to this conversion is not an equal opportunity one, in that influencers already holding other forms of capital are able to disproportionately claim emotional capital. In Chapter 2, I will discuss these case studies and to what extent they align within their idea type. In Chapter 3, I will explore how the politics of the space of social media fame reproduce and strengthen inequalities to the extent that these “rules” do not apply equally across identities. Due to their operation within these institutions of inequality, these influencers are required to change their performances as influencers, still with the same end-goal and those I will discuss in Chapter 2, but reflective of their marginalization or privilege. In Chapter 4, I will be unpacking the structures of fame production in the context of social media influencers and the ways in which social media is considered a career. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will discuss how social media celebrity departs from and upholds aspects of traditional celebrity.
CHAPTER 2: IDEAL TYPES

While I argue that social media fame is not, in fact, a new form of fame, there are different types of social media influencers, each ideal type with their own path toward recognition. The influencers I will be considering first fall upon a plane laying on two axes. The first axis measures the space between reliability and aspiration. In other words, to what extent does this person attract me due my perception of their proximity to my experience and to what extent do they attract me because I seek to be like them. The second axis is cringeworthy to beloved. This axis measures the reception of the influencer. Are they someone who is commonly the subject of a meme online (cringeworthy) or are they lauded and openly admired (beloved)?

Of course, an influencer could fall somewhere between two sides of the axis. This form of mapping holds space for the variations of these criteria across the sprawling landscape of social media. I will begin with a case study of Emma Chamberlain who falls somewhere in the space of relatable and beloved. Chamberlain’s performance rests upon the illusion that she is just like any young person who might be watching her videos. While this is of course not the case, I will explain what her performance looks like as well as how it functions. Secondly, Kylie Jenner exists somewhere within the box of aspirational and beloved. As a woman who more explicitly derives her social, cultural, and symbolic capital from embodying beauty standards, her content is defined in almost exclusively aesthetic terms.

Next, Trisha Paytas is most appropriately placed within the space of cringeworthy and relatable. Paytas is most widely known for scandals and controversy that reverberate through the space of social media, effectively racking up the view’s on Paytas’s posts and those made by the
online personalities who are making content expressing outrage regarding her actions. At the same time, her antics serve as emotional catharsis for those watching as she performs actions that most people attempt to conceal. Finally, I explore an influencer known as HR Collections who falls into the category of aspiration and cringeworthy. This particular individual is known for attracting angry attention and offending large groups of people online. Nevertheless, evoking negative emotions still falls within the bounds of affective management and ultimately causes more attention. Before diving into the first case study, I want to clarify that each one of these influencers embodies some level of aspiration, enabling them to be influencers. Those who are considered aspirational play up their embodiment of aspiration, and those who are considered relatable play down their embodiment of aspiration in order to appear more accessible. Likewise, all influencers have probably experienced a mix of being considered cringeworthy and being considered beloved, but most lean on one or the other depending upon what kind of performance they want to construct. With this in mind, I implore the reader not to think of these categories as particularly fixed, but rather see them as a helpful structure for understanding different styles of online performance.

EMMA CHAMBERLAIN

Emma Chamberlain is an ideal type of influencer most appropriately categorized as the “relatable-beloved”. As will be demonstrated through a case study of her online persona, Chamberlain has largely acquired celebrity through tactics that help construct her front stage performance as a typical, quirky teenage girl. Emma Chamberlain, 19 years old as of May 22, 2020, was honored as the 2018 Streamy Awards Breakout Creator\(^1\). Additionally, Time Magazine included her in its list of The 25 Most Influential People on the Internet (Time Staff, 2019). The Streamys are an internet based award show.

\(^1\) The Streamys are an internet based award show.
degree of influence held by Chamberlain is evidenced in the TikTok trend in which there are a multitude of videos regarding what she will be wearing this summer (@carolinafreixa, 2021).

When she started filming and editing lifestyle vlog-form videos of herself, Chamberlain was going to high school and living in a San Francisco suburb. Chamberlain’s early videos can best be described as a mix of lifestyle and fashion as well as a sort of casual comedy content. The style of video in which a creator does an activity while joking around or making fun of themselves is a highly consumed form of content and many influencers make use of this form in some way on their various accounts. Of course, this content involves the concept of a performance of authenticity (Goffman, 1956). Chamberlain’s first video, posted in June of 2017, is entitled City Inspired Summer Lookbook 2017. From the very first post, Chamberlain was weaving aspects of aspiration (an ultimately hip, youthful style and aesthetic) and relatability (including a cut of stumbling on her words and zooming the camera to her face to acknowledge in a self aware manner how silly she is). Most of the video is populated by classic lookbook style shots in which Chamberlain is showing off her outfit (Chamberlain, 2017). It is important to note that beauty and lifestyle influencers have been a mainstay of Youtube since the mid-2000s, so these sequences are far from original. Even from this first

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2 The word “vlog” stands for “video blog”. It is usually a short form video of the events and influencer experiences throughout their day, most likely tightly edited in order to capture only the most engaging and interesting aspects.
video we can see Chamberlain departing from the traditional perfection of this content genre to include performances that undergird the appearance of authenticity.

In 2018 Chamberlain moved to the epicenter of internet celebrity, and ultimately all celebrity, Los Angeles. In her podcast *Anything Goes with Emma Chamberlain*, she explains that while she did indeed move to L.A. for her career, she was also driven to move due to a concerning experience of harassment when she was home alone that was at least partially a result of her newfound fame on YouTube. Los Angeles provided Chamberlain with the social and industry infrastructure to build her audience.

In early 2018, Chamberlain began working with the brand Dote. Dote is a shopping and social media site that has received most of the popularity it had due to the involvement of influencers. Launched in 2014, Dote was designed as a virtual shopping mall mainly for brands like Urban Outfitters, Madewell, and Sephora. Chamberlain launched a clothing line with Dote in 2018, effectively advertising Dote to her already 8 million subscribers (Wu, 2019). In a video published in March of that year, Chamberlain traveled to Austin, Texas to stay in an AirBnb with other young women, influencers her age (Chamberlain, 2018). The girls were gathered to capture and post content that would appear to the viewer as a teenage sleepover. Tiffany Ferguson, a commentary YouTuber, unpacks the “Dote girl” in one of the videos in her “Internet Analysis” series. Ferguson explains that, to her understanding, the emergence of Dote and other influencer marketed brands converged with the rise of the Emma Chamberlain- type creator, a girl who seemingly effortlessly blends aspiration with relatability. What characterizes this style most is a young teen girl (almost always thin and white) who makes general lifestyle content but puts a relatable and humorous spin on it (largely through the use of comedic editing). Dote later took

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3 This note on the race and body type of the girls invited on the trips is of course not a coincidence. There are several videos on YouTube made by creators of color outlining their negative experiences on these Dote trips. Usually, Dote would invite the same group of white
Chamberlain and this same small group of popular creators on a variety of all expense paid trips including to the Coachella music festival and Fiji where they spent their time featuring each other in vlogs and Instagram posts. On these trips the girls are followed and shot by a photographer (Ferguson, 2019). The photographer not only provides the girls with incredibly high quality photos that they could post to their own accounts, but Dote also chose the selection of the photographer’s photos to add to their account. Both the high quality photos and the visibility of appearing on Dote’s Instagram represent opportunities that build up the social capital of the girls. As a result of these trips Chamberlain was able to make connections with a prolific brand for the time as well as other young influencers doing similar work. While Chamberlain has since discontinued her partnership with Dote as well as her friendships with many of the girls with whom she went on trips, she undoubtedly was able to reach new audiences with the content created from these opportunities. She was also able to solidify a conception of her lifestyle as aspirational in that she was pictured frequently with other attractive young creators seemingly having a fun time in a beautiful location. Chamberlain, especially on her podcast, has alluded to a realization that perhaps these relationships were surface-level and disingenuous, but she has never explicitly shared names (Chamberlain, 2020, 12:00). Displaying what appears to be genuine friendship among aspirational figures establishes a dynamic in which fans desire this kind of social interaction and thus interact with the content more to experience the positive feelings associated with even distant proximity to it.

girls on each trip while consistently inviting a few girls of color that would change with each trip. Creators like Daniella Perkins, Eris The Planet, and Kiana Naomi have cited feeling othered on these trips from being separated from the other girls in a different room during their stay to not getting individual photoshoots that the white influencers were getting. Refer to Tiffany Ferguson’s video “Dote- An Example of Selective Diversity” for a more indepth look at this dynamic.
In regards to her general online persona, Chamberlain achieves an expression of genuine vulnerability on a level akin to a friend. A few of the titles of her YouTube videos explicitly refer to the performance of vulnerability in the content such as *HOT GIRL SUMMER MAKEOVER *I cried* or *RECOVERING FROM A MELTDOWN LOL*. This type of content mixes aspects of the human experience not commonly thought of as belonging in the spotlight--emotional distress, for example--with humor to construct a performance for fans that most closely resembles the relationship one would have with a close friend. This content style combined with Chamberlain’s signature closing, “I love you guys. Thank you so much for watching” and then giving the camera a “forehead kiss” leverages the emotional capital Chamberlain holds to keep fans invested in this para-social relationship. The relationship between Chamberlain and her fans represents the complex landscape of solidified and blurred boundaries of internet fame. In the fostering of this para-social dynamic with fans, Chamberlain is doing emotional labor, publishing videos in which she is visibly distraught and performing vulnerability. She is able to transform this into the emotional capital in the form of her fans feeling intimately connected with her. While Chamberlain’s own content and interaction with
fans supports a discourse of increased proximity, the material reality of her relation to fans is actually much more complicated.

Not all of the feedback Chamberlain receives from fans is positive. “Hate comments”, as they are often referred to by creators, also have the effect of seemingly rendering the influencer accessible. Additionally, by referencing the negative impact of hate comments on her, Chamberlain reinforces this apparent proximity. In both her podcast and a video entitled *Reacting to Hate Comments*, Chamberlain has discussed the effect that the inevitable disparaging comment has on her self-esteem. While traditional it-girls had the tabloids, influencer it-girls have hundreds of comments that often appear as notifications under every single post that they make. A boundary between Chamberlain and fans is indeed blurred through the structures of social media, like the comment section, which allow fans to give direct feedback. On the other hand, this does not translate to actual social proximity as Chamberlain’s verbal adoration for her fans would suggest.

Chamberlain explains in her podcast episode, entitled “Los Angeles”, that if it were not for her management team being there, she would not choose to live there full time (2020). While it might seem obvious, it is important to highlight

Figure 4: Chamberlain photographed for *Allure* magazine by Leah Adicoff
that access to celebrity management (as well as opportunity to transfer social media fame into other avenues of celebrity such as music, film, and television) is perhaps the strongest draw for influencers to Los Angeles. This reality provides an argument against the perception of social media fame as a more democratic opportunity for celebrity. While it seems like Chamberlain edits a fair amount of her content herself, she undoubtedly required the support of her management team in negotiating her podcast with Ramble (the podcast network she works with), her relationship with Louis Vuitton (with whom she attended Paris Fashion week), and her coffee company Chamberlain Coffee. Although Chamberlain did not gain initial popularity on YouTube under the guidance of a management team, the business decisions and opportunities that she has capitalized on since would have been impossible without professional representation. These material structures that in reality reinforce a social distance between Chamberlain and her fan base are largely obscured in most of her content, serving to support a discourse of social proximity.

KYLE JENNER

Kylie Jenner departs from Emma Chamberlain in that she is so closely aligned with aesthetic standards that she cannot as deeply tap into the emotional capital of relatability, and
thus relies upon being considered an object of admiration. Her reliance mostly on adherence to standards of beauty and femininity allows her to align most closely with the ideal types of the “Aspirational- beloved” influencer. I will begin by outlining the career of Jenner, highlighting especially her status as already famous in her successful transition to the online space.

Kylie Jenner, age 23 as of August 10, 2021, first became a public figure at the young age of ten when her family’s reality television show “Keeping Up with the Kardashians” (KUWTK) aired on E! in 2007 (Us Magazine). She grew into adolescence, a performer on the stage of authenticity. Although evidently incredibly wealthy, the Kardashian family’s job was to “be themselves”. Constantly considered in relation to her sister Kendall—who became a high fashion model—Kylie Jenner was always regarded as the edgier twin. Kylie did not follow the same route as her sister, but rather chose to establish her own market for an “Instagram model”.

Jenner is the only influencer I will be discussing who had somewhat of an established team operating in the backstage before her transition to social media. It is also valuable to add that it is less imperative for someone like Jenner to hide these backstage formalities than someone like Chamberlain, because her performance relies a lot less on an
illusion of authenticity. Kris Kardashian-Jenner, appeared on KUWTK as a mom-ager for each of
the girls, and continues to represent Kylie as her manager, but her team has grown significantly
since her early days. She has a publicist, manager, and agent. Jenner also has a sort of squad of
friends, many of whom contribute to her brand in some way. We have Tokyo Stylez who does
her hair and makes wigs for her, Ariel Tejada who is her makeup artist, and Victoria Villarroel
who is her assistant, along with others who exist as part of her circle of friends as well as being
actively employed by Jenner (Malec, 2017).

Jenner has received substantial support and guidance from her family, steeped in the
industry of celebrity and brand building for years. Kylie and her sister Kendall collaborated with
PacSun to create a clothing collection called Kendall & Kylie in 2013 (Kendall + Kylie.com).
Two years later, in 2015, the two established a line at TopShop as well. It is hard to imagine two
tweens establishing a clothing line to be distributed in mainstream stores, but less so when one
considers how their family has spent decades leveraging their celebrity in the establishment of a
brand⁴. The Jenner sisters grew up in a Los Angeles mansion, exposed to the networking abilities
of their older sisters and mother. In other words, Kylie Jenner grew up with social, cultural, and
economic capital at her disposal which was exchanged for symbolic capital in the form of
celebrity both during her time on the popular reality show, but also in her immediate popularity
and following on social media. Jenner has then been able to transform this symbolic capital back
into economic capital through the branding of herself and the products that she sells.

⁴ Kris Kardashian-Jenner was the driving force behind the creation of the now discontinued
reality series that brought her family widespread recognition, but their interaction with celebrity
and participation in a culture of extreme wealth did not start there. Kris was first married to
Robert Kardashian, a high powered lawyer and close friend of OJ Simpson, who was on
Simpson’s defense “Dream Team” during the 1995 trial (Shapiro, 2020). After her divorce from
Robert, Kris married Caitlyn Jenner, a former Olympian in the decathlon.
Jenner is arguably most famous for her features, emblematic of her personal brand and yet difficult to distinguish from others who have effectively constructed a similar appearance using similar products, procedures, and edits. Jenner is of course one of the most distinguishable of these “Instagram baddies”, mostly because she underwent this transformation quite early and quite publicly. Jia Tolentino, a staff writer at The New York Times who often writes on social media, traveled to Los Angeles to explore what she calls “the Instagram face”. If you are familiar with the entire Kardashian/Jenner family you may have a rough idea of what this face looks like, but for the sake of explanation, Tolentino illustrates the “at the same time non-specific yet incredibly recognizable face”, writing the following:

“It’s a young face, of course, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones. It has catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; it has a small, neat nose and full, lush lips. It looks at you coyly but blankly, as if its owner has taken half a Klonopin and is considering asking you for a private-jet ride to Coachella. The face is distinctly white but ambiguously ethnic—it suggests a National Geographic composite illustrating what Americans will look like in 2050, if every American of the future were to be a direct descendant of Kim Kardashian West, Bella Hadid, Emily Ratajkowski, and Kendall Jenner (who looks exactly like Emily Ratajkowski).” (Tolentino, 2019).

While Kylie may edit her photos, the transformation of her appearance from her younger years on “Keeping Up with the Kardashians” was achieved largely through plastic surgery. Tolentino arranged an appointment with an unnamed celebrity plastic surgeon, explaining to him that she wanted her face in real life to appear like a photo of her with a snapchat filter applied to it--one that narrows the nose, enlarges the eyes and lips, and gives the skin an airbrushed smoothness. He then used FaceTune to manipulate her features on a screen before her, which was
released for use on photos bound for social media in 2013 with the promise of “wow[ing] your friends with every selfie”. The doctor revealed that many clients come in with reference photos of his most famous clients. Tolentino left the appointment with a roughly $30,000 estimate for the completion of a list of procedures that would theoretically help Jenner accomplish the iconic “Instagram face”. When Tolentino asked if this kind of procedure has grown in popularity, the doctor responded, “I think that ten years ago it was seen as anti-cerebral to do this [...] But now it’s empowering to do something that gives you an edge. Which is why young people are coming in. They come in to enhance something, rather than coming in to fix something (2019)” While the last sentence is quite arguable, the doctor speaks to a growing legitimation of this kind of backstage work. Goffman explains that standards for acceptance modifications or “misrepresentations” change over time and in different social contexts. Using the example of the concealment of gray hair, Goffman argues that “modifications of one’s personal front that are considered misrepresentative one year may be considered merely decorative a few years later, and this dissensus may be found at any one time between one subgroup in our society and others” (Goffman, 1956, pg. 61).

Jenner, at first hesitant to share the procedures she had done, revealed in 2019 that she had been getting lip-fillers for five years. This is significant because these are the lips from which she essentially built her breakout career. All of the Kardashian/Jenner sisters have established business ventures outside of the successful reality television show. Kylie Jenner launched her brand Kylie Cosmetics in 2015, which consisted of a line of lip gloss at the time. With this brand as her main earner, Jenner established herself as a “self-made” millionaire valued at over $900 million in 2018 (Elle Australia, 2019). Unsurprisingly, Jenner chose to create a product that related closely to the brand she had established on social media: pillowy lips. The
access to economic capital that Jenner would have had to have at the beginning of her career in order to access these high-price surgeries reinforces a boundary between Jenner’s embodiment of beauty standards and fans who might wish to do the same. Undoubtedly, many bought Kylie Cosmetics with the aspiration to achieve that Instagram-facelook for which Jenner has paid heavily. As a celebrity, Jenner has contributed to setting the taste for this look, a taste that has developed into a norm for those who are looking to amass a following on Instagram (specifically in the subgroup of beauty and lifestyle). While plastic surgery has been a more accepted form of “misrepresentation” in the past ten years, FaceTune has grown in acceptance more recently even though it does not translate into spaces outside of social media (contributing to its seemingly more misrepresentative nature). If one cannot afford the several thousand dollar price tag of the “real thing”, they might choose to purchase the three dollar FaceTune application and make desired alterations in the digital space. In 2017, four years after its release in 2013, FaceTune became Apple’s most popular paid application (Jennings, 2019). Much like the intention behind plastic surgery, most users of FaceTune, in-app filters, and other editing tools seek a difference that brings them ever closer to the ideal, but without an alternation of their personal front (in the context of their profile) that
will raise any eyebrows or prove ultimately embarrassing. Jenner and other influencers like her set the standard for the ideal “look” (one that can really only be achieved through alteration), while also helping to legitimize the routine of making alterations. The existence and promotion of editing apps, filters, and beauty products allows for fans to participate in trying to recreate Jenner’s look, supporting a discourse of social proximity, when in reality only the wealthy can achieve “the real thing”.

Jenner’s ability to market a makeup brand based upon her features (partially genetic, partially purchased through thousands of dollars in procedures) is part of a larger trend of social media marketing through particular influencers. In late 2019, Coty Inc. paid $600 million for a controlling stake in Kylie Cosmetics. According to Sharon Terlep of The Wall Street Journal, “It is part of a wave of fledgling cosmetics lines capitalizing on celebrity founders and social media-driven marketing. As sales of mass-market mainstays such as CoverGirl have floundered in recent years, upstarts such as Kylie Cosmetics and Glossier, a skin-care and makeup line developed by the founder of a popular beauty blog, are growing fast” (2019).

Eventually releasing a product for sale to the public has become somewhat of a norm over the past few years. While Kylie Cosmetics still holds the trendy spirit of a self-developed brand, Jenner grew up with access to the connections and capital to build her brand which only grew after becoming popular online like many of the other influencers with brands.

With 36.9 million followers on Twitter, 209 million followers on Instagram, 10.1 million subscribers on YouTube, and over 25 million followers on Snapchat, the question that remains is why exactly Jenner was so successful in her shift to social media fame, while other celebrities have not been. Essentially, the answer to this question may be simply that she came in at the right
time and with enough existing understanding of social media. Paris Hilton, a Kylie Jenner of the early 2000s, grew her celebrity in much the same way as Jenner, through her own reality television show *The Simple Life*. After the show was discontinued, Hilton could be found on the cover of a tabloid, discovered by paparazzi going out somewhere in a clip probably aired on TMZ or Access Hollywood, or on her MySpace. Hilton currently has 16.8 million followers which is still a substantial following to be sure, but is appreciated much more as a symbol of the early-2000s it-girl glamour then considered to be a relevant social media influencer. Jenner, unlike Hilton, grew up during the rise of social media, learning the strategies for constructing a profile in a way that Hilton would have never really encountered in her young teen years. Moreover, the “Keeping Up With the Kardashian” lifespan began to decline during a period in which access to Jenner through her social media platforms was only growing. Especially for her followers on Snapchat, fans could receive updates on what Jenner was doing throughout the day.

While other celebrities have had various levels of successful moving into the influencer space, Jenner has been one of the most successful. I believe that this success grew from two main aspects of Jenner’s life. First, Jenner grew up in the spotlight, with incredible proximity to celebrity. While she was certainly playing the part of the edgier sister of the two Jenners on the show, she was also performing a certain degree of authenticity. She was not playing a part entirely fabricated by a screenwriter, but rather a stylized projection of herself that was undoubtedly worked on by her, her mother Kris, and the production team. Additionally, there existed a process in which “reality” was edited to highlight the most exciting moments. We can see that these aspects of reality television, especially in the case of an ensemble show, are directly applicable to the process through which many social media influencers project a version of themselves. Considering the format of the vlog, it is incredibly similar to a series of clips in a
reality television show like KUWTK; however a vlog is posted on one’s own account, and they decide what is left in and what is edited out.

In just one of her vlogs posted to her YouTube channel entitled *Kylie Jenner: A Day In My Life*, Jenner captures several vlog tropes in one twenty minute video, including a clip of her waking up her toddler Stormy, shots of her getting ready in the morning, choosing what to wear, attending a meeting for an upcoming Kylie Cosmetics drop, and Jenner surprising her friend for their birthday with a dinner all in font of a backdrop of wealth and access (Jenner, 2019). As a viewer, I was not isolated from her by a conception of the difference in the material conditions of our lives. Rather, I was drawn in by the relaxed way she interacted with the camera and with the other characters in her life in front of a camera. The entire video was filled with the kind of familiarity that is a trademark of any effective influencer’s post. While there is a series on her Youtube channel in which she explains the Kylie Cosmetics products, and much of her content on her channel involves some sort of reference to her brand, it is artfully combined with content that does not seem to be selling you anything. Indeed, this is a critical balance for influencers, the practice of selling some sort of merchandise (which many, if not all of them, do) while not making the audience feel as if your only aim is to market them products. Kylie Cosmetics has been marketed almost exclusively through social media, but Jenner herself had already established such a personal brand “front” that her own brand appears as a compliment to the experience of engaging with Jenner as a commodity herself.

Especially in the context of Kylie Jenner, I must address a noticeable and concerning lack of representation in the case studies chosen, namely that they are all white, cisgender, and at least at this point in their lives, wealthy. PAPER Mag, a cultural publication, published a visual composite drawn from the pictures of Instagram’s top 100 influencers. The composite image
itself is all too familiar to anyone who has ever scrolled through their Instagram explore page: slim, heart-shaped face, button nose, full lips, white. This is the Instagram face Tolentino was researching. It is not just Instagram influencers who are overwhelmingly white; eight out of ten of the highest paid influencers on YouTube are white. This reality stands in contrast to the narrative of meritocratic opportunity for recognition that these sites promote. Influencers are disproportionately white and generationally wealthy for the same reason that any high-paying job is also disproportionately white and generationally wealthy: these are the people who have access to an aspirational lifestyle (the ability to travel to exotic destinations, the Instagram face, stylish clothing, etc) as well as a nice camera to capture them and a management team to help them build a personal brand. While Kylie might seem exceptional due to the extent of her lifelong relationship to celebrity and economic capital, evidently access is a critical component of building a top social media account and online identity.

TRISHA PAYTAS

Trisha Paytas represents perhaps the least intuitive route to establishing an identity as an influencer, that is “relatable- cringeworthy”. Paytas has essentially grown her following by making content that other creators feel the need to comment on due to its inflammatory or otherwise inciting nature, thus increasing the views for both Paytas and those that are reacting to
her content. Michelle Renex, a senior writer at the Australian pop-culture publication *Junkee*, echoes a common argument across the space of those who analyze online content, namely that Trisha Paytas is essentially “uncancellable” simply because she does not care if people are offended by her content. I would argue that very few people who could be categorized as influencers have ever been effectively or completely canceled. Moreover, I assert that Paytas is not simply oblivious, but rather has at least partially crafted an intentional identity around shock value. Jenna Nicole Mourey, known to many as Jenna Marbles, a 33 year old Youtuber who was in fact the first channel that I subscribed to when I began interacting with content on Youtube, left the platform this past summer after uploading a video apologizing for racist content that she uploading in the early 2010’s; she specifically named a video uploaded in 2011 during which she did blackface in an impression of Nicki Minaj. While the video was unlisted years ago, Mourey did not address the offensive content of the video until this past summer. Over the course of her apology video, she emphasizes that she never meant to offend or hurt anyone, saying, “I don't want someone to watch something and feel hurt or offended now for any reason, at all” (reposted by thisvideoisback). I am not going to argue for or against the validity of the apology, but rather
highlight the fact that although making an apology video in response to being called out for problematic behavior or content is not uncommon, discontinuing an account or channel is rare. Since the publication of this video in June, Mourey has not posted on her Youtube channel or made an appearance on her Twitch account. I offer an alternative the common discourse regarding Paytas’s fame to argue that Mourey could be better categorized as an exception. As I continue to outline the course of her celebrity, it will become increasingly clear why this is particularly shocking. Renex argues in her piece on one of Paytas’s most recent online feuds, that “being problematic has become Trisha Paytas’ entire brand and has been the driving force behind her YouTube views in recent years” (Renex, 2020). As evidenced in the exception of the case of Jenna Marbles, it is uncommon for influencers to attempt to apologize for making offensive content. In the case of Paytas, her lack of acknowledgement and more importantly concrete attempt to repair for wrongdoings is not the exception for content creators who center a certain degree of chaos in their work, but rather the rule.

It is essential to note that Paytas has been recently diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). She also recently explained on episode 17 of the podcast she shares with Ethan Klein entitled Frenemies that she has struggled with drug use, especially methamphetamine (Paytas 7 Klein, 2021). I want to establish this understanding before going deeper into the life and career of Paytas to highlight a possible complication in the conception of Paytas as a performer. As I go on to explain some of the controversial content that Paytas has posted, it is important to understand that much of it was posted during a time in which she was unmedicated, suffering from BPD as well as the reality that some of it may have been filmed or captured when Paytas was under the influence. I cannot point to any specific video as I have not found confirmation from Paytas herself referring to a specific video or content piece posted while using
meth or any other substance. Untreated mental health concerns ultimately intensified Paytas’s performance of controversy. This is not to say that these factors, which have been harmful to Paytas herself and are to be regarded seriously and with compassion, are good and/or intentional tools that Paytas has used. However, it would be misleading to suggest that these dynamics did not factor into her construction of an online presence. This newly established understanding of Paytas’s cognition allows for additional context in understanding some of her more scandalous videos. A Goffman-esque understanding of performance cannot only account for the most neurotypical among us, and therefore we must hold an understanding of uncontrollable factors as well as intentional performance as dynamics that can and do occur at the same time.

It is admittedly complicated to piece together the past experiences of influencers, mainly due to the reality that the media sources that cover them are sparse compared to A-List celebrities. Even in the case of media sources that cover more well known celebrities, biographies are mostly found on sites that often post conjecture like Daily Mail, Insider, or sites that do not refer to their sources for the information posted. Regardless, an influencer’s background can greatly inform an understanding of the mechanics behind building a celebrity identity. Taking it back to the beginning, Paytas has referenced her experience as a sex worker a number of times. It is worth noting that in many instances, Paytas could be classified as a “troll”, that is posting inflammatory and/or false content in order to elicit widespread response, so it can be difficult to determine what is and is not true over the course of her explanations in her videos. Nevertheless, it is still important to understand how a creator chooses to explain their past experiences. Paytas’s early posts on Youtube frequently referred to her experience in sex work. In a video entitled The Stripper Diaries- The Beginning, she explains that she began stripping after dropping out of college and moving from Pecatonica, Illinois to Los Angeles, California.
Paytas explains how she was originally cast on the Greg Behrendt Show in 2006, a show in which the stand up comedian helped couples with their relationship problems in front of a studio audience, but the show went under shortly after the season started. Left without employment, Paytas began her first job as a stripper at 18 (Paytas, 2012). A couple of sources suggested that Paytas had begun her career in sex work at a young age—as young as 14—but I have not been able to verify this. Paytas clearly had the intention to develop some form of celebrity as evidenced by the next phase of her career, characterized by the beginning of her YouTube channel in 2007 as well as sporadic and intentionally bizarre appearances on television. In 2009, Paytas was cast as “a fat Jessica Simpson” in the Eminem music video for the song “We Made You”. In the 2010 pilot for the show My Strange Addiction, Paytas appeared as a woman who was considered to be a “excessive tanner” (IMDB). In 2011, Paytas appeared as a speed reader on The Ellen Show. Later that year, she was cast on an episode of Millionaire Matchmaker (Wikitubia).

Paytas’s early YouTube content is what can only be described as a bizarre patchwork of videos that would have grown from Paytas’s personal interests. A number of them are homages to Quentin Terrintino as well as a video diary of dieting. The camera quality of these early videos is quite low, perhaps shot on a recorder that anyone might have for home videos. She posted her first Mukbang5 in 2015 around the time that she started collaborating with Shane Dawson6. Her

5 I feel it is necessary to elaborate on the social media genres I refer to here because although they may seem commonplace to those who see them on their various feeds everyday, the reality is that they are somewhat niche. “Mukbang” translates roughly to “eating show” in Korean. The trend originated roughly 10 years ago on Korean social media, but has been adopted by many people who create content for social media. In the context of my use of the term, Mukbang videos are usually longer form videos in which the subject consumes large portions of food (Tidy, 2020). In these videos, Trisha Paytas usually orders several dishes from a restaurant and tells a story or talks about her life while eating.

6 Shane Dawson is a popular Youtuber. His relation to Paytas is worth mentioning because the inclusion of their collaborations connotes an increased access to social capital for Paytas.
collaboration with Shane Dawson is worth noting because it marks an increase in access to a community of successful YouTubers. Dawson was perhaps one of the most popular YouTubers around this time.

Mukbang videos, in which Paytas consumes large amounts of usually fast food while talking to the audience, have largely contributed to an understanding of Paytas as diverging from norms of thinness. While Paytas was becoming well known for Mukbang videos, she continued to post different styles of videos including music videos for songs she released, “story time” videos, and haul videos. Alongside her eclectic approach to video content, Paytas, although appearing heavily made up and outlandishly dressed in some videos, makes use of a completely stripped down look for videos with such titles as I’m going insane and my miserable christmas. Trisha Paytas in the front stage is someone whose appearance changes wildly to correspond with the fluctuation of the subject.

Perhaps the video that solidified Paytas’s online presence as ultimately chaotic was im a chicken nugget (Figure 7) posted in 2016 in which she declared that she identifies as a chicken nugget with shocking earnest (Paytas, 2016). This video is often referred to in efforts to discount her later video posted last year in which she came out as a transgender gay man. She has since unlisted this video from her channel, presumably in response to the widespread backlash it received. Attempts to search for this video on YouTube will be met with results for hundreds of videos, many made by transgender creators, reacting to the original video posted by Paytas. The reaction video is a phenomenon central to the development of online celebrity. A creator will

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7 “Story- Time videos” can also be considered a genre of content most often found on YouTube, but also appears on Tik Tok. The key elements of this genre are eye-catching and “click- bait” titles and extreme or bizarre occurrences.

8 “Haul videos” rose to popularity thanks to the consistent shopping habits of the young teen beauty, fashion, and life style influencers of the early 2010s. In this genre of video, the creator shows the audience each thing that they have bought in a certain shopping spree or over a certain period of time.
post something, often controversial or offensive, that effectively mobilizes an audience explore multiple perspectives on the drama. Entire channels are dedicated to reacting to content that is deemed “cringeworthy”. The top three reaction videos under the search “Trish Paytas trans man” have well over 2 million views between them. After seeing one of these videos, a viewer is prompted to go to the source of the controversy, Paytas’s original video, to experience it for themselves (or they could be led to reaction videos after watching the original video). Either way, both the original video and the videos made in response to it continue to mutually accrue views. This sort of ricochet effect has been and continues to be intentionally used by some influencers as a tool to gain more views. One of the most obvious examples of this occurred in the wake of the infamous It’s Everyday Bro music video posted by Jake Paul\(^9\) in 2017. Logan Paul, Jake Paul’s brother and co-collaborator since their early days on Vine, then made a reaction “diss-track” alluding to conflict between the two brothers entitled The Fall of Jake Paul. Other creators posted videos on their channels speculating about the feud, leading viewers to watch both videos. Viewers hopped from channel to channel to investigate, and ultimately each video was left with 277 million views and 266 millions views respectively. While it might create a different effect than the sense of love and adoration Chamberlain seeks to foster in the space between her fans and herself, Paytas is also doing emotional and affective labor in order to

\(^9\) Jake Paul is another YouTuber who rose to popularity for shocking and controversial content.
garner emotional capital. Many folks are not repelled by the cringeworthy content Paytas posts, but are rather drawn intensely to it for its ability to insight strong emotion, even if the emotion is not explicitly positive. I will outline a few examples of this content in the context of Paytas.

Although Paytas maintains her identity as a transgender man, she did take down the original video and posted a video in October of 2019 simply entitled *apology* in which she addresses the LGBTQA+ community, bare faced and teary eyed, to express her hurt at the backlash. She explains that she had been working with a therapist who specialized in gender for years before posting the video as well as expressing that her quite feminine presentation is more of a costume she wears for her career than a representation of her gender identity. In this video, she acknowledges that she has trolled in the past, indirectly responding to those who cited the chicken nugget video as evidence to invalidate Paytas’s video. The apology found in this video is more of an acknowledgement that she might have used incorrect or offensive language at some point, saying “I am so new to all of
this” (Paytas, 2019). During the time in which Paytas was posting about her gender identity, she was also making different forms of content as usual.

In March of 2020, Paytas posted a video that had nearly the exact same effect “Meet My Alters” in which she explains to the audience that she has Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)\(^\text{10}\). Paytas explains how she self diagnosed and continues to explain the characteristics of her DID. This video came after the publication of a successful video by the YouTuber Anthony Padilla in which he seeks to further understand DID by talking to people who have been diagnosed with it. Paytas references this video as well as one of the creators with DID who was in it saying, “I watched it and I was like, oh, she like seems crazy” (because Paytas’s original video was taken down, I pulled this quote as well as this series of events from a video entitled Trisha Paytas CALLED OUT by Anthony Padilla... big yikes on a channel called Tea Spill, a prominent gossip channel on YouTube)\(^\text{11}\). The creator referenced in Paytas’s video, DissociaDID, made a video in response to express their hurt and clarify misconceptions of DID that might have arisen from Paytas’s video. Again, views are sent from channel to channel, as folks try to understand the controversy while extracting entertainment from the bizarre mess of it all.

Around Rosh Hashanah in 2020, Paytas began posting frequent Tik Toks regarding her interest in Judaism; in many she wore a kind of Israeli military costume and explained to viewers how to get ready for the Jewish New Year (Paytas, 2020). Many Jewish creators reacted to her somewhat spontaneously found interest in Jewish culture. By now we recognize that inciting responses to misleading and/or offensive content is a central part of Paytas’s performance. The performative tone of her videos talking about Judaism most closely matches the videos created

\(^{10}\) This video has been unlisted by Paytas, but an edited version can be found entitled Trisha Paytas meet the Alters.

\(^{11}\) It is worth noting that these channels offer a similar sort of echo chamber effect as the reaction channels in that they direct views to search for videos and other posts references in summaries of weekly social media drama.
during a time in which Paytas was professing an extreme interest in *Beetlejuice*. Similarly to her donning an Israeli Military uniform, Paytas has also posted in a full and absurdly accurate Beetlejuice costume as well as dressed as Gerard Way, lead singer of the band My Chemical Romance. Through the practice of speaking on and performing around a variety of topics and situations, Paytas is able to strike emotional chords across large communities of her viewership.

In my exploration of the career and social performance of Trisha Paytas, I seek to surface specific aspects of the culture of producing “cringeworthy” content on social media. As I have explained, Paytas is to be considered “cringeworthy relatable” due to the kind of inciting content she posts. The “relatable” aspect of her persona is informed by her lack of performing aspiration. Compared to the influencer I will explore next, she does not flaunt wealth or access to the degree that she “pulls back” the curtain to show aspects of herself that most people would not show on social media. She is able to make audiences feel like they know her due to the intimate nature of her content while simultaneously eliciting intense emotion, be it positive or negative. It is worth noting that Paytas’s neurodivergence situates her as almost a spectacle to viewers. As evident in the examples of videos I have laid out, this can be incredibly problematic. In theorizing about “cringe culture”, we must acknowledge and be critical of the ways in which folks can be labelled as cringey for living with certain identities which marginalize them as non-normative bodies. I mention this dynamic because I believe it should be explored deeper beyond this work.

**ALEXANDRA PEIRCE/ HRH COLLECTION**

I first came across Alexandra Peirce, the influencer and YouTuber behind the jewelry brand HRH Collection in a series of videos on TikTok, in which users had clipped snippets from her YouTube videos. All of her videos follow the basic theme of her yelling at the camera (the
viewer), normally about something that viewers had commented on another piece of content she put out. For example, I came across a TikTok posted to the account @hrhcollectionfans taken from a YouTube video Peirce posted entitled “CUTIE MAKEUP LOOK AND MC DONALD”, in which she says the following:

“This is the thing, I was like vibing to my music last time, right. And then everyone kept asking, like, ‘What song is that? What song is that? What song is that?’ . Like oh my god, like you’re so annoying, like use your Shazam, enter in some key-fucking-words into fucking Google you fucking idiot. Like I would never in a million years write a comment like, ‘Oh my god what song is that.’ No, it’s an obvious song!” (hrhcollectionfans, 2021)

The italics are my addition to notify when she is fake quote-mocking comments from viewers. When she does this, she uses a high, grating voice, almost like a crow’s caw. Even when she is not imitating her “annoying” viewers, she still sounds incredibly agitated. Despite Peirce angrily berating her fans, they seem to be genuinely enjoying it. To give an idea of the response to these videos, I will include some comments pulled from both the TikTok post and the original YouTube video:

“People hate on her but she’s just saying what we’re all thinking”

“I thought this girl was crazy but the more I see of her the more I see myself in her lmaooo [crying emoji, which in these situations can signify crying because of laughter]”

“‘It makes me so sad that you are so dumb’ Our Queen!”

“CLASS IS IN SESSION!!”

These comments signify a number of themes viewers find in Peirce’s videos. Yes, she is incredibly intense, but also she says what her fans consider to be “hard truths”. Many also seem
to regard her tirades as more or less funny. Honestly, on the internet, people often respond to yelling. Many of the commenters express a sentiment of wishing they could say those same things to people in their lives, but of course they wouldn’t. While these rants promote a feeling of relatability that helps promote the parasocial relationship that upholds fandom, Peirce tends much more toward striving to be aspirational than striving to be relatable. This is evident in the way in which her content revolves around her performances of wealth and alignment with beauty standards. In a video entitled *MY RECENT SHOPPING*, Peirce toggles constantly between speaking to her “trolls”, calling them “basement dwellers”, speaking to her fans in acknowledgement that they know certain things about her (it is hard to tell when she is speaking to her “fans” or her “trolls”, and showing her recent high-end purchases from brands like Hermes (Peirce, 2021). Peirce is evidently speaking to a high-end lifestyle in a similar way to Jenner, effectively performing a character of aspiration for viewers. Peirce departs from Jenner, however, in how she interacts with the viewer. In other words, she does not seem to be seeking to be perceived as kind by her followers, but rather “honest”. A blog called Guest of a Guest published

*Figure 8: Screenshot taken from Peirce’s video entitled MY RECENT SHOPPING*
an article which collected several particularly problematic posts made by Peirce that showcase her lack of aversion to conflict in the space of social media. In the midst of the pandemic, Peirce posted a video on Instagram regarding “the mask situation” and referring to it as “bullshit” (2020). Additionally, Peirce, on July 15th of 2020 made a video entitled “CURRENT EVENTS W/ ALEX” regarding the Black Lives Matter movement in which she said, “Don’t come at me with the white privilege bullshit,” (Guest of a Guest, 2020). While the comments under this video tended toward the negative side, they were still a bit of a mixed bag. The following comments capture the mix of emotional reaction to this highly inflammatory content:

“The Karen’s are losing it in 2020. 🍿 😂 This video is hilarious. Keep them coming! ❤️”

“But Alex, people are "living their life" and trying to "do them" but certain people are condemning them because of their color and sexual orientation and thats the issue at hand, EQUALITY on ALL fronts!! This isn't some made up reality, there are people who are actually suffering and dying just for "living their life". Please read the room Alex.”

“<3”

“Love this vid! Good on you for opening up about your opinions on these topics :)”

The comments above illustrate a slight difference from the comments presented earlier under one of her more tame rants which seemingly garnered more emotional resonance. The constant, however, is that some viewers are drawn to this sense that Peirce is “saying what other people don’t want to say”, while others are more drawn to the “hate watching” aspect of it; and still others seem to be simply amused by her intense reactions.

It is quite evident that Peirce is not seeking to be beloved in the conventional sense of the term. In this way she is not engaging affective labor by trying to make her viewers feel comforted or happy in her content production, but rather the opposite. She is effectively making
audiences feel so taken aback and put off, that they cannot take their eyes away. This is another form of emotional capital heavily involved in the market for cringeworthy content on the internet. It is all about being able to draw strong emotions from the viewer, and whether those are positive or negative has more to do with what kind of influencer one is rather than if they are an influencer at all. Similarly to Paytas, Peirce stokes controversy which allows viewers to bounce from her videos to the videos reacting to her videos back to her account to see the reaction she has to those reactions, effectively racking up attention on her account. Unlike Paytas, Peirce closely aligns herself with wealthy, white aspirational standards of thinness, access to high-end products, and general wealth. She is able to embody the #goals performance of aspiration while still widely being characterized as “unhinged” or otherwise cringeworthy.

CHAPTER 3: HOW INFLUENCERS NAVIGATE STRUCTURES OF INEQUALITY

AÏSSATA DIALLO

While the avenues toward social media fame described in the last chapter are common, influencers may have to work in different ways and perhaps even achieve a different level of fame depending upon the identities they hold. In this chapter, I will make use of two different case studies that embody how inequalities persist and are strengthened within the structures of social media.

First, I will consider Aisata Diallo, who is perhaps most similar to Jenner on the axis of relatable to aspirational, and certainly more beloved than cringeworthy. Diallo is aligned most
with the categories of aspirational and beloved in that her celebrity is entirely built around the aesthetics of her accounts as well as her embodiment of many ideals of beauty and femininity. Diallo is not as widely known as Jenner, though she did also get her start from a reality television show: *Love Island, U.S.* As I described, there is an unsurprising lack of influencers of color in the upper tier of their celebrity. Part of this dynamic is evident in examining Diallo’s own follower base. Most of Diallo’s followers are Black. When thinking about the dynamic of race in internet fame, the concept of “Black Twitter” echoed in my mind. University of Virginia Assistant Media Studies professor Meredith Clark explained “Black Twitter” in an interview with the school’s publication *UVAToday.* When asked what exactly Black Twitter is, Clark responded,

“I define “Black Twitter” as a network of culturally connected communicators using the platform to draw attention to issues of concern to black communities. It’s the culture that we grew up with. It’s the culture that we experienced in our lives and school, in the workplace, with entertainment – and you see conversations coalesce around specific cultural moments….I always explain to people that Black Twitter doesn’t have a gateway,
a secret knock. It’s not a separate platform. It’s all in the way that people use the platform to draw attention to issues of concern to black communities,”(Whitelaw, 2018).

This quote from Clark contains a key point that is expanded later in the conversation, namely the fact that Black Twitter is not a distinct platform, but rather a community bounded by an intention to center blackness. Clark explains that this does not mean that no white or non-black people of color can take part in Black Twitter--after all the community is not a homogenous, cohesive, or singular voice that can deem someone either in or out\textsuperscript{12}. However because the purpose of Black Twitter” is “cultural resonance”, as Clark puts it, it is largely a black space in which Black experience, humor, brands, style, music, etc. are circulated. It is important to note that Black Twitter is often regarded as the birthplace of popular slang on the internet (this slang should be understood as AAVE rather than internet slang).

While perhaps it is most examined on Twitter, Black spaces occur on every social media site. Indeed, Diallo, a Black influencer from New York City who is both a model and a graduate student, has a mostly Black following on each of her social media sites. With this dynamic in mind, the question still remains as to why none of the highest paid YouTube stars or highest paid Instagram influencers (who are not otherwise incredibly famous, like Beyonce) are Black (Berg & Brown, 2020 and Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Clearly it is not for a lack of audience, as there is not a lack of Black people on the internet making compelling content. In response to this question, I will explore how the structures of celebrity production, integral to the phenomenon of internet fame, uphold dynamics of inequality. First, I want to provide some background on Diallo herself.

\textsuperscript{12} Clark explains the exception that can exist in some cases like Rachel Dolazal, former president of the Spokane, Washington chapter of the NAACP who attempted to pass herself as Black until her parents revealed that she was in fact white.
Diallo appears to have garnered most of her recognition due to her appearance on the first season of Love Island: U.S. Love Island is a reality dating show originally based in the U.K., but has since branched off to include an Australia and U.S. edition of the show. Before being cast on the show, Diallo followed an impressive though comparatively normative path (that is to say that she did not leave highschool to pursue social media). At age 12, she moved with her mother and her six siblings from Guinea to the United States as refugees. She graduated early from SUNY Albany, and fluent in French, English, Fulani, and Spanish, now, lives in New York City as a model and graduate student at age 25. Diallo is described on the show’s site on CBS as a fun-loving social butterfly whose most distinct characteristic is her choice to remain celibate until marriage. She first appeared on the show in episode 12 and was voted off ten days later (Love Island USA Cast CBS webpage). In regards to her transition into modeling, I was able to find a source that explained how Diallo took some time off from school after her undergraduate degree to decide what she wanted to pursue. During this time, she casually modeled for a friend who was working on their photography. The photos then began to go viral on Tumblr, and when other users started to claim the pictures as their own, Diallo decided to identify herself. Diallo is now represented by MMG, a modelling and talent agency headquartered in New York City. MMG seems to work in the same way as the other management and marketing agencies I have discussed, connecting influencers and models (and those who identify as both) with casting calls and brand deals (MMG Team). Diallo, despite her growing success on social media, has remained a student with plans of possibly pursuing a career in medicine (Love Island Wiki).

13 For the sake of clarification, Love Island is a show in which there is always one member more of one gender than the other (this is a largely cisnormative and heteronormative premise). In order to maintain a sense of competition, if there is an even number of men and women, one more woman or man is introduced.
14 Tumblr is a social media site, founded in 2007, and has been home to some of the most extensive fan communities outside of Twitter. Though all social media is, Tumblr is particularly aesthetically-centered.
Like the other influencers I have looked into, Diallo has several revenue streams, including an Amazon store, a partnership with Savage X Fenty (Rhianna’s lingerie brand), Tula skincare and the eye shadow palette produced under her name with the brand One Click Beauty. While Diallo uses her TikTok and Twitter accounts occasionally for brand promotion, she posts the majority of her sponsored content on her Instagram, both in the format of a permanent post as well as in Instagram stories. Diallo does not appear to use Youtube with great frequency, though the handful of videos that she does have up are of high quality with content that ranges from a boyfriend tag to a makeup tutorial. Her Twitter mainly consists of humorous, clever, or relatable content such as, “I love wearing masks because I can [go] outside looking crazy and no one would know it’s me [laughing emoji] (Diallo, 2021). This content serves as a “peak into her life” for her fans, while the backbone of Diallo’s brand is emphasized on her other platforms as remaining highly aspirational. I was able to find out the most information about the beginnings of Diallo’s career as well as her life in general from her blog. Blog’s are not all that common in the space of social media fame now in the way that they might have been in the early 2000’s, and only a fraction of Diallo’s followers on other platforms have consumed content on her personal site (the highest viewed post one saw on the blog was 4,015 compared to 61,108 likes on her most recent Instagram post). It’s also worth noting that likes on a post are usually much fewer in number to the amount of followers someone might have and much less than the amount of people who actually saw the post. On Instagram, one can find photo after photo of Aissata capturing her with glowing skin, usually with eyes made up into a cat eye, a stunning outfit.

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15 This is a feature on Instagram that allows users to make a post that is temporary and stays on one’s profile for around 24 hours.
16 A “tag” video is a video in which usually there is a specific format to it that creators are supposed to follow. In the context of a “boyfriend tag”, a video usually includes someone featuring their boyfriend in the video and the couple going through a list of questions predetermined by the creator of the “tag”.
(usually with an affiliate link\(^\text{17}\) in the caption, and usually in some aspirational location (on a beach in the Dominican Republic or on a rooftop in Manhattan).

While of course I do not have access to Diallo’s specific metrics and am unable to determine how much money exactly she has been able to make from the different typical streams of influencer income that she also draws from, it is critical to discuss the pay gap facing black influencers and other influencers of color. As I noted earlier, most of Diallo's followers are Black. Her personal account is not an exception in this; the social media space is a largely segregated one for a variety of reasons. The reason this segregation exists is not because of black influencers or small scale posters, nor does it exist because consumers want to take part in a community in which they experience recognition, validation, and cultural resonance. I argue that the inequalities experienced by Black influencers and many other influencers of color is due to the marketing calculations of celebrity management agencies and large corporations. Those structures have been ingrained in the building of celebrity for decades. In June of 2020, a group of influencers of color penned an open letter to the influencer marketing agency Fohr, responsible for making the connection between influencers and brands who can sponsor them. Valerie Eguavoen, one of the women who collaborated on this letter, wrote in an Instagram post, “I cannot be silent when I see clear evidence of pay disparities between Black women and other

\(^{17}\) Affiliate links are given by a brand to an influencer to include in a post. Influencers can than make commission from the sales made off of the link they shared.
creatives who work with you [...] I cannot be silent when you refuse to address racism from [sic] individuals on your team adequately. Enough is enough,” (Cochrane, 2020). Fohr later put out a statement claiming that they recognized the unfair nature of their business practices, pledging an internal investigation and audit into their payment and negotiation practices (Cochrane, 2020).

This issue also exists in the brand space, with certain retailers offering creators of color free items alone, while white influencers are offered free items and payment for posts with those items. Lydia Okello (they/them), a queer Black influencer, was reached out to by Anthropologie, a women’s fashion brand, with an offer to send them pieces of clothing in exchange for posting content promoting the brand and providing content for the brand itself to promote a marketing campaign they had designed around Pride Month (Hsu & Garcia, 2020). Okello reported feeling powerless in negotiations with the brand (URBN, the parent company, owns Anthropologie, Urban Outfitters, and Free People), but ultimately weary in the face of an offer that did not include other forms of payment (Hsu & Garcia, 2020). Despite pressure to not assert themself, Okello attempted to negotiate for payment, a request that they say was evaded by the brand. Okello shared their experience, saying:

“I’ve worked as a Black creative all my adult life, and I’ve noticed that there’s often an assumption that you should feel flattered that this large
company is reaching out to you, that it has noticed you, and that reflects a greater cultural narrative that the creative work of marginalized groups is less valuable. It’s like, ‘Just shut up and take it, or we’ll find someone else,’” (Hsu & Garcia, 2020).

As in the case of the Dote girl events and trips, calculations are being made by these large corporations as well as many of the marketing agencies that negotiate these partnerships regarding the marketability of creators of color, especially Black creators. Especially in the case of Okello, they were asked to provide content to a brand that would essentially allow the brand to signal an ideal of inclusivity to which they were ultimately not willing to commit.

Diallo appears to have partnerships with mostly, though not exclusively, businesses owned and founded by people of color. Diallo herself has several posts speaking to her experience as a Black woman and in support of Black Lives Matter. She has gained celebrity largely through her adherence to societal ideals of beauty and femininity, proving to be a valuable resource to a variety of brands looking to be associated with the potential of looking like her. At the same time, Diallo and Okello inhabit an intersection of identities that has been marginalized. That is to say that in thinking about what a social media influencer looks like, few people would default to Diallo despite the reality of her success. As I have argued, this marginalization occurs most intensely at the level of management and marketing agencies, viewing women of color as less aligned with the western beauty standards that they believe will help them sell products. This is most disturbing when we consider how Jenner greatly profits from an appearance of racial ambiguity. I argue that this inequality stems from the fact that, as I will explore in the next chapter, social media influencers largely make use of the same structures of celebrity production that famous people have been using for decades in the film and television industries.
Forrest Stuart, in his book entitled *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy*, presents valuable insight on the narrative of the democratization of fame on social media through his study of young Black drill rappers in the Southside Chicago neighborhood of Taylor Park. Stuart (2021) introduces the implication of his study, writing the following:

“This irony suggests the need to reconsider the broader relationship between technology and inequality. In policy circles, it’s increasingly common to talk of the digital divide separating Americans along race, class, and geographic lines. [...] Philanthropic organizations, local governments, and other techno-optimists spent the past decade or so clamoring to outfit classrooms and community centers with computers and tablets, as though the mere presence of technology would automatically improve socioeconomic outcomes. But as recent reports suggest, the digital divide may not be as wide as we once imagined. [...] poor black youth are more glued to their smartphones, tablets, and social media accounts than their privileged peers. And yet, socioeconomic inequalities persist at historic levels,” (2021, pg. 8).

The young men included in Stuart’s study turned to social media for capital success in the face of economic and social marginalization, pursuing the promise of stars like Justin Bieber or Chief Keef who rose to celebrity status through social media. The reality is that no matter how much emotional and affective labor is expended by these young people, structures of inequality keep them from wielding the same degree of emotional capital held by their more privileged counterparts. Finally, with an effort to push back against those arguing that the lesser financial success of Diallo, Okello, young drill artists, and the majority of Black creators in general is a market-driven phenomenon, I want to cite a study done at University of Chicago which found
that Black teens create more online content than any other racial group (Cited by Stuart, 8, from personal conversations with Cohen et al, 2012). With the knowledge that there is no shortage of black content creators or Black audiences consuming content, a market-based analysis of the racial barriers of internet fame is not enough to explain the gap that exists. In the citation of this study, I am not suggesting that black consumers of internet content should enjoy content make by black creators simply because they are Black, rather I am seeking to open up more space to discuss the kinds of structural inequality in the process of fame production even and especially for social media influencers as spoken about by Okello.
DAVID DOBRIK

David Dobrik is another influencer who interacts differently with the space of internet celebrity, not in his marginalization, but rather in the ways in which his privileged identities allow him to readily access emotional capital while being able to perform less labor and exploit the emotional labor of others. Dobrik embodies standards of aspirational masculinity: access to wealth, power, an extensive social network, and excitement. The content made by Dobrik is short form, fast paced, and high energy, usually involving some sort of gimmick or prank. While Dobrik is largely thought of as setting the stage for making this kind of content a successful genre across YouTube and social media in general, he has managed to take advantage of social arrangements to reap the benefits of emotional/affective labor performed by others. Dobrik was the ninth highest paid YouTube star of 2020 according to Forbes, with earnings of about $15.5 million (Berg & Brown, 2020). On his main YouTube channel, Dobrik has 18.7 million subscribers. He has a regular upload scheduled on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Consistently uploaded videos are incredibly favorable to the mechanisms of visibility on these platforms, especially YouTube.
First, I want to offer some background on Dobrik’s youth. Dobrik, in an episode of his podcast with fellow Vlog Squad member Jason Nash called Views, explains that he is a DACA recipient. He moved with his parents from Slovakia to the suburbs of Chicago when he was five years old. Dobrik explains this in the podcast episode entitled Why I May Get Deported-- DACA. The day the podcast was recorded, he was supposed to board a flight to Australia, but because Donald Trump announced that he intended to discontinue the program, Dobrik and his team decided to stay in the United States for fear that Dobrik would not be able to travel home. He continues to explain that he was unaware he was not a citizen until 16 years old when he attempted to take his driving test (Dobrik & Nash, 2017).

Figure 11: Photo posted to Dobrik’s Instagram depicting his recent Teen Choice Awards
I went back to the first episode of this podcast released May 18, 2017 entitled *YouTube Douchebags* to get more insight, as it seems that Dobrik and Nash use that space to comment on their lives. At first glance this podcast might seem like a pulling back of the curtain to the backstage-- with its sharing of more personal aspects of Dobrik’s career-- however, I argue that these “behind the scenes looks” are actually part of constructing a front stage performance in which Dobrik can maintain an illusion of authenticity, while still including performances of access to different forms of capital. This authenticity is constructed from Dobrik’s explanation of his road to celebrity. Dobrik talks about how he watched YouTube as a kid. Dobrik is 24 years old now, which means that he would have grown up watching creators like Jenna Marbles, Shane Dawson, and others who were some of the first to establish YouTube as a career (Dobrik & Nash, 2017). This performance of authenticity, the affective labor that goes into explaining possibly sensitive aspects of one’s personal life to a large audience, is turned into emotional capital held by Dobrik as he is able to communicate a narrative of “self-made” fame to his audience. It was not until Dobrik graduated high school, and had already amassed a substantial following on the app Vine that he decided to move to Los Angeles (Dobrik & Nash, 2017). This narrative reads as accessible, a small town guy gaining success from posting regularly on an app, just making jokes and being himself. Dobrik is seemingly a living example for these aspiring content creators of opportunity for success on these platforms. Through this process of direct broadcast to his fans about his “personal life”, Dobrik effectively assists in the construction of the myth of the democratization of fame on social media.

Vine, an app discontinued in January of 2017, allowed users to upload six second videos. Like TikTok, Vine enabled creators to use in-app edits and therefore have the ability to make use of comedic timing. Many creators on Vine traveled to YouTube after the app was shut down and
many have had some degree of success. While Dobrik himself was considered relatively popular it is worth noting that his friends such as Liza Koshy (collaborator and former girlfriend) and Gabbie Hanna were much more established with upwards of seven million followers. Dobrik used Vine to make what could be classified as comedic videos and gained over one million followers before the app was shut down. On his podcast, Dobrik explains that he wants to be upfront with how much he makes from the content that he posts on social media because he knows that is what people are interested in learning, admitting that he himself used to estimate the earnings of his favorite YouTubers (Dobrik & Nash, 2017). Again, this “peek into his private life” serves to aid in the constructions of his authenticity while still supporting his performance of wealth and power. He goes on to explain that a creator could earn $30-100k from one sponsored Vine (Dobrik & Nash, 2017). His success on Vine led him to move to Los Angeles to continue posting on that platform. This was around the same time that the 1600 Vine Street apartment building came to be known as the Vine apartments, a place that housed various prominent social media personalities that Jake Paul. While Dobrik did not move into this exact building, collaborating with other Viners became a central aspect of his career.

Dobrik explains that he began vlogging on YouTube after the 2015 Vidcon, driving to the airport with Koshy. She had a standard vlogging camera, as she had started on YouTube herself earlier that year. Dobrik explains his experience of realizing that he wanted to create a YouTube channel on the podcast, saying, “And I just put it on me and there was something cool that I liked about seeing myself and just like being able to record myself,” (Dobrik & Nash, 2017). VidCon was created by Hank and John Green. The first VidCon was hosted in the basement ballroom of the Plaza hotel in Los Angeles with 1,400 fans in attendance. Witnessing its immediate success,  

18 John Green is perhaps most well known now for his romantic teen novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, but the brothers are also incredibly successful YouTubers who make largely engaging educational videos with creative editing and animation.
YouTube sponsored the event the next year. The convention has grown in its capacity to hold both more creators and fans since it moved to the Anaheim Convention Center (Bacle, 2020). VidCon features creators from virtually every popular platform, from Twitch (a platform for streaming video game play) to TikTok. Creators speak on panels, carry out performances, and host meet-and-greets, where they essentially serially interact with hundreds of fans\footnote{The convention was bought from the Greens in 2018 by an entertainment company called ViaCom. ViaCom also owns CBS, BET, Comedy Central, Nickelodeon, Paramount, Pluto TV, Showtime, Awesomeness TV (a network comprised of programs that mainly feature influencers), CMT, VH1, and more. It is not surprising that such a prolific media conglomerate would see the opportunity in VidCon; in 2019, 75,000 people attended the convention.}. VidCon is a space in which fans and influencers interact in close proximity, emphasizing an apparent lack of boundaries between the lives of both parties. Just like Dobrik, many of these young people intend, in some way, to become prominent on social media themselves. These conventions, one of the very few spaces of in-person encounter, allow for additional and perhaps more extreme fostering of para-social relationships between fans and creators as well as the emotional leveraging that comes along with such relationships.

In the podcast episode *YouTube Douchebags* Dobrik and Nash discuss how the group of friends and at the time Viners came to contribute largely to Dobrik’s particular form of vlogging (Dobrik & Nash, 2017). The Vlog Squad itself has been a sort of rotating group of content creators, though always revolving around Dobrik. This collaborative group did not form immediately upon Dobrik’s transition to YouTube. Commentary YouTuber, Hannah Rose who makes videos under the account name SmokeyGlow, has a series of videos in which she explains the evolution in content and persona of certain influencers. In her video on Dobrik, she explains that the first “phase” of Dobrik’s content contains videos that combine shots of him and his friends from vine “behind the scenes” either simply hanging out and talking or strategizing and planning to make a vine with other short form skits. She explains that in reality, “A lot of his
videos are basically just vines [...] like longer versions of vines,” (Rose, 2020). Additionally, none of his Vine friends at the time were all that interested in starting YouTube channels (Dobrik & Nash, 2017). On his podcast, Dobrik explains that this contributed largely to his content because if one of his friends had an idea, they offered it to him to use in his videos. As I briefly mentioned, those friends were at the time much more popular on Vine than Dobrik. Dobrik was able to leverage these social connections privately in order to maintain a steady stream of content, while also publicly associating this group of relatively successful creators with him. This allowed Dobrik to publicly display social capital and symbolic control over the group, and by featuring them in his vlogs he was pulling in their audiences as well. This group structure, with Dobrik harvesting content from an entire group of people, is an example of the way in which Dobrik’s access to social capital allows him to profit from the affective and emotional labor of his friends. The effect of making content with a group of friends is that it communicates a sense of belonging and social connection to the viewer, making them feel included in turn. This positive feeling of inclusion on the part of the fan, drawing them back again and again to Dobrik’s content, is also a form of emotional capital.

These lower production videos characterized much of Dobrik’s early content. On his podcast, Dobrik notes that because he was not yet popular on YouTube and far less followed on his platforms than his other friends who moved out to Los Angeles, he ran Vine accounts that reposted other vines or only posted advertisements (Rose, 2020). While this may seem odd, if you log on to Instagram today and go to your curated “discover feed”, you will find many accounts that essentially do the same thing, often posting memes alongside advertisements for games in the App Store. While these accounts are never really tied to an identity, they gain a following through frequent posting of “funny” or “relatable content” and because it is all
reposted, Dobrik would have had to expend only a fraction of the energy he puts into creating original content\textsuperscript{20}. Of course these accounts were not building Dobrik’s notoriety, but they were providing the funds he needed to maintain the character that he fronted in his vlogs. I supposed the function of explaining this to fans in a podcast is also to attest to his doing the “grunt work” of social media, that is, running a series of less glamorous accounts, ultimately enhancing his rags to riches narrative.

Hannah Rose, continuing with the different phases of Dobrik’s career, explains that February 8, 2016, Dobrik posted his first 4 minute 20 second video which has been the length of every single one of his vlogs since then (2020). This is also around the time that Dobrik started evidently putting more effort into the editing of his videos and ultimately using higher quality cameras. In what can be considered this new phase of Dobrik’s content, the friends commonly featured on his vlogs began to establish their own vlog channels and followed a similar format to those of Dobrik. This group of people essentially filming the same exact events from different perspectives that are posted on different accounts can be considered the original “Vlog Squad”, which includes David Dobrik, Zane Hijazi, Heath Hussar, Carly Incontro, Erin Gilfoy, Scotty Sire, Toddy Smith, Liza Koshy, Matt King, Gabbi Hanna, Jason Nash, and Alex Ernst (Rose, 2020). They essentially filmed what appeared to audiences as particularly enjoyable hang out sessions. Dobrik’s celebrity clearly grew from the public facing nature of this aspirational friend group. In accordance with Dobrik’s seemingly in-front-of-the-curve approach to content creation, he was early in his full appreciation and use of clickbait. Clickbait, especially in the context of Dobrik’s videos, is characterized by vague and intriguing titles such as \textit{ARE THEY DATING?!?} (the title of a 2016 video of Dobrik’s), thumbnails of himself making a surprised face, and

\textsuperscript{20} To expand my point further, over the course of a minute I was able to find an Instagram page @silkyivy on my explore/discover feed whose posts consist solely of screenshots of other people’s tweets. This account has 36K followers.
pictures of social media celebrities who would draw a large audience. These tactics helped to establish Dobrik’s life as apparently incredibly exciting. SmokeyGlow considers phase three to be when Dobrik began posting “prank” content, or more generally, videos in which he and his friends would carry out some sort of gimmick. This phase began on August 12, 2016 when Dobrik posted a video entitled *Swimming in 1,400 pounds of dry ice* in which he and his friends try to break the record for the amount of dry ice put into a swimming pool (Rose, 2020). This video blew up with over 120k views. Rose explains that she herself found Dobrik’s channel through this video as it had been reposted by many of her friends on her Facebook feed (2020). Both the short length and the quick cutting, exciting nature of the video allowed for it to translate easily to other platforms.

Another key characteristic of this phase of Dobrik’s content is that all of his friends and fellow vloggers began taking on particular characters. For example, as Jason Nash is at least 20 years older than each member of the collaborative group, he often falls into the role of the old and out of touch friend. As his career progresses, the degree of social leveraging he takes part in becomes far more explicit. As outlined in the example of Nash, Dobrik is now able to use the symbolic
capital of being a successful YouTube star to undergird the social capital necessary to organize a
dynamic in which his friends depend on him for the success of their careers on social media.

The whole ensemble of vloggers, which can be thought of as a performance team in
Goffman’s terms, proves interesting to look into when considering the discrepancy between front
and backstage interaction. Goffman repeatedly uses the example of the staff at the Shetland Hotel
where he observed backstage and frontstage interactions. In the context of the hotel, Goffman
explains that,

“when a guest was forward enough to step into the kitchen uninvited, the first person to
see this would call out in a special tone of voice either the name of the other staff person
present or a collective name [...] On this signal, males would remove caps from head, feet
from chairs, the females would bring their limbs into more proper array, and all present
would visibly stiffen in preparation for a formed performance,” (1956, pg. 182).

As in this example from Goffman, Nash and Dobrik note a shift in behavior in
themselves as well as their fellow Vlog Squad members when the cameras are on. The departure
Dobrik’s team takes from the team of the Shetland Hotel waitstaff is that there are defined front
and backstage areas so that a breach is something to be noted, something out of the ordinary.
Furthermore, the team has a response planned if such an occasion arises so that they may slip
into postures that fit nicely with the guests’ understanding of their front stage performance. The
intrigue that drives people to Dobrik’s channel, the channels of other Vlog Squad members, and
the channels or accounts of almost every influencer is that we want to know what these people
we are so entertained by are doing “behind the scenes”. The spaces normally reserved for
relaxation and unmasking, become the stage when the cameras are on. Almost all of Dobrik’s
content is designed to feel to the viewer like a breach, supporting his performance of
authenticity. If you watch Dobrik’s vlogs, you know what his living room looks like, his backyard, his kitchen. Perhaps one could argue that the delineation between front and backstage manifests in the cameras being on or off; however, the nature of the content and the team requires that cameras might be on at times when less expected, especially in the context of a prank. Dobrik admits that although this makes for more exciting content, it has become hard to tell where the line between performance and experience exists.

Dobrik, in his podcast episode entitled *Money Buys Happiness*, explains that he has felt this sort of confusion of performance most in his relationship with Liza Koshy. He recounted vlogging the act of buying Koshy an expensive painting and presenting it to her as a gift, capturing her astonishment. Dobrik explains how later Koshy asked him if he gave it to her solely to produce content to film. He notes that the views from the video essentially helped pay for the expensive gift and that he knew it would provide for interesting footage, but he also loved Liza and genuinely wanted to give her something that would bring her joy (Dobrik & Nash, 2017). Dobrik himself seems to be confused with the mix of private and public life. It is worth noting that the couple did not go public with their relationship immediately upon meeting, and although they are no longer together, their relationship and split did not suggest a complete fabrication for the sake of content, although they were both able to grow their brands due to the investment fans had in their relationship. This culture of “shipping” in celebrity relationships strengthens fans’ emotional investment in a creator.

While I have already discussed how including Koshy is vlogs effectively engaged her already existent viewership of over 7 million (at the beginning of her relationship with Dobrik), it is important to note that the fans’ experience of the two together is not just a combination of the two fanbases, it is a product for consumption in and of itself. While there has always been
intrigue around celebrity relationships (think Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie or “Brandgelina” as they were referred to), speculation regarding celebrity relationships is not just bound to the tabloids. In the comment section of each one of their videos together, viewers comment on their relationship. This feeling of interest and right to access on the part of the fans I believe can be explained by the already alluring power of a celebrity relationship combined with the sensation and illusion of proximity between fans and internet influencers. This is of course not unique to Dobrik and Koshy; especially in the TikTok community of young influencers, content regarding the relationship of influencers can be found across all platforms. The influencer gossip account “Anna Oop” synthesizes the fresh drama around Charlie D’Amelio’s relationship with Chase Huddy (the two are teenage TikTok creators who had been or have been dating) or some other young influencer couple. Fans also often make videos on their personal or fan accounts editing videos of the couple together (taken from their profiles) along with romantic music, or even write fan fictions (fictionalized accounts of their relationship). By engaging with what would normally be considered the more personal parts of Dobrik’s life, audiences feel closer to Dobrik, as if they know him. This investment and feeling of proximity is evidenced in the separation between Dobrik and Koshy.

On June 4, 2018 Liza and David posted a video on his account explaining that they were breaking up. While they insisted that it was amicable and they had every intention to continue their friendship, fans were devastated. Every single comment signifies how deeply fans of the two felt invested in a relationship of which they almost felt a part. Some explain how they felt they were growing up alongside Liza and David, another wrote, “this still hurts me, i will never get through. please get back together, now,” ([David Dobrik DD], 2020).
Very soon after Dobrik and Koshy’s break up, Jason Nash began to date Trisha Paytas and Paytas began to be featured in many of the vlogs posted to Dobrik’s channel. Paytas and Nash were captured on Dobrik’s vlogs, often in some sort of conflict, often with Paytas crying, or the two yelling at each other. Philip DeFranco, in filming a video regarding controversy that arose during Paytas’s break from Dobrik and the Vlog Squad, comments on the larger dynamics that can be drawn for this situation. He opens the video by saying, “It’s a story that you could initially just see as drama, but really when you look at it there is more to it. There’s commentary on what it means to over-share, where is the line in what you’re filming and doing,”(2019). It is worth noting that this kind of sociological questioning of what dynamics between and among influencers mean for society at large is a key aspect of the ecosystem of social media. To summarize the situation that led Paytas to make a video claiming that Dobrik is manipulative in his effort to create interesting content, Paytas had been dating a member of the Vlog Squad named Jason Nash. In a vlog, Dobrik captured Nash claiming that if Dobrik could arrange a sexual encounter between Nash, Paytas, and Tana Mongeau (another popular creator), he would “be his slave for a year”(DeFranco, 2019). When later asked, also on camera, why Nash wanted to have sex with Mongeau, Dobrik replied, “Because he liked damaged girls.” Paytas made a video not only calling out the inappropriate nature of the original joke (Mongeau was 20 and Nash was 45 when these videos were posted in January of 2019), but also expressed hurt at being referred to by her boyfriend and friend as “damaged” (DeFranco, 2019). As I mentioned, she specifically lashed out at Dobrik arguing that his process for creating content and his relationship with his collaborators were harmful and manipulative. In response, Nash and Dobrik highlighted videos that had been taken of Paytas in which she performed behaviors that they considered inappropriate, like making a joke about having sex with a young man in the presence of her

21 Unfortunately, racist and otherwise harmful “jokes” are commonplace in Vlog Squad videos.
boyfriend or saying some such other sexual remark (DeFranco, 2019). Paytas, in her video regarding her offense to the comments made by Nash and Dobrik, expresses disgust at the implication of her (age 30 at the time of the video) and Nash (again, age 45 at the time of the video) having sex with a 20 year old. Over the course of this scandal, Dobrik was able to catch most of it on camera while additional aspects were added as a result of videos commenting on the situation made by Paytas and other folks involved in the situation. Dobrik was effectively able to stir up controversy, elicit strong emotional responses from other creators and fans, and leverage the benefit in the form of increased views for his videos. While this dynamic closely mirrors the bouncing around of views discussed in the context of Paytas’s cringeworthy content in the last chapter, in this case, Dobrik is able to deflect the controversy onto others (Paytas and Nash). In this way, Dobrik’s friends are constantly those who are performing, and he ultimately gains the emotional capital by being the one able to make them perform.

Another type of content that began to be featured more were shots of what could be considered pretty risky behavior, such as Dobrik’s friends drinking large amounts of alcohol and becoming incredibly intoxicated as well as stunts, many of which end in someone getting injured. The progression of the content in Dobrik’s videos suggests an increase in intensity over time, essentially trying to capture footage that would make for the most shocking and enticing thumbnail and video title. These extreme stunt videos are still mixed in with videos of Dobrik giving away a Tesla and driving around Los Angeles with Justin Bieber. Whether or not Dobrik is truly going too far with his antics, his inclusion of extreme content reinforces his identity as embodying the masculine ideals of access to excitement, wealth, and a large network of successful people. The “pull back the curtain” style of his content, much like in the case of Chamberlain, serves to cement his performance of authenticity. Again, Dobrik is performing
social capital in his ability to access well-known celebrities like Justin Bieber, and at the same time, he is harvesting sensational content at the expense of his friends as evidenced in the content he has posted with Trisha Paytas in an evidently distressed state. Exploring Dobrik’s trajectory to social media fame gives valuable insight regarding the ways in which dynamics of inequality and privilege affect how hopeful influencers interact with the space of social media fame. While Diallo and other black influencers are made to do disproportionate emotional/affective labor and reaping less benefits, Dobrik is able to leverage the emotional labor of others who depend on him for social capital that has proven incredibly lucrative.

CHAPTER 4: THE BUSINESS OF INFLUENCING

As I have considered in these case studies, social media celebrity, like other more traditional forms of celebrity, depends upon particular forms of access: managers, agents, public relations teams, etc. Management agencies remain a central aspect of celebrity production in the realm of social media, limiting this kind of fame’s ability to be the democratic, do-it-yourself opportunity it often claims to be. As I begin to look into management agencies for online influencers, I am encountering firms that seem geared towards brands that are interested in influencer-based marketing. The marketing firm Obvious.ly is one such firm. They seem to handle the logistics and networking between brands and influencers. They advertise their services as identifying possible influencers, all communication, shipping of products, and analyzing results of the campaigns. Obvious.ly boasts an “active network of 40,000+ influencers” with which brands can connect. They match brands with influencers based upon
data regarding age, location, content, and aesthetic. Obvious.ly was cofounded by Mae Karwowski and Max Domain in 2013. On the “About Us” section of their website, Karwowski explains that years ago, she knew that the next phase of digital marketing would be “authentic partnerships between brands and social media influencers.” Most of the top hits on Google, upon searching influencer management agencies, offer similar services. Although Obvious.ly does not seem to fall into this category, some management agencies deal with both management and marketing. Viral Nation, founded in 2014 in Toronto, is one of the largest agencies that deals with both of these dynamics. They provide services to influencers such as negotiating contracts, connecting them with their extensive network of brands, production of merchandise, content licensing, collaboration across media platforms, as well as casting calls and other means of transferring social media fame into other forms of more traditional celebrity.

Karwowski was, of course, not the only individual to see the potential of influencer celebrity. Many existing talent agencies have shifted a certain degree of their energies toward influencer marketing and management. Meryl Hoffman, a leading agent with Curtis Brown literary and talent agency based in the United Kingdom, went on to establish Laurie Ronnie management which represents beauty, wellness, and lifestyle influencers, the kind you might find promoting sustainable, bespoke jewelry and posting recipe pictures from their rustic, bohemian kitchens with streams of natural light. According to the Curtis Brown website, Hoffman continues to represent individuals who seek more traditional forms of celebrity such as theatre, radio, television, and music.

While these talent agencies play a large role in the ability for influencers to monetize their content through brand partnerships, YouTube itself offers the opportunity to make money from posting a video even if it does not contain a brand sponsorship. Two years after its launch
in 2005, YouTube began expanding opportunities for advertisement outside of the traditional display ads one can find in the margins of their screens when visiting most websites. Specifically, in 2007, YouTube began to make use of in-video advertisements as well as establishing the Partners Program which allows content creators to monetize their content. In order to join this program, creators must apply and be accepted. On its site, YouTube explains that they “review your channel before you’re accepted in the YouTube Partner Program. We also constantly review channels to make sure you’re meeting all our policies and guidelines,” (YouTube Help, 2021). Even after a creator gets accepted into the program, their video still may be demonetized if it contains subject matter that violates the “Advertiser-friendly content guidelines”. These guidelines are pretty basic, and include not posting adult content, illegal drug use, violence, and other common sense parameters. Creators often have a pre-roll advertisement as well as a couple advertisements included throughout the video. YouTube also provides the ability for creators to place some or all of their content behind a paywall. Essentially, viewers can pay for channel memberships or pay for their comments to be highlighted in chat streams. These options are far less used. In fact, I have yet to see one influencer who requires a subscription to be paid in order to access their videos. Like the promotion option, these features seem much more geared towards the already-established media sources that have moved some of their content on to YouTube.

Youtuber Lexi Lombard (with 400,000 subscribers on YouTube and 122,000 followers on Instagram), explained how she makes money as an online personality on her podcast @lexie in November of 2020. Lombard opens the episode entitled “money + body image” explaining that

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22 In 2008, after lengthy negotiation, CBS and MGM began posting full-length programming on the site. YouTube also began allowing for promoted videos. Youtube now has more than 10,000 partners including Disney, Univision, Turner, and Channel 4. According to the Atlantic article I drew this timeline from, hundreds of partners are making six figures from the advertisements on YouTube. From what I can tell, this six figure paycheck simply from ads does not apply to many of the influencers like those discussed in this study. These incredibly high-earning partners that pay for promotion on the site tend to be already established media outlets like those listed above.
she has seven streams of income not including the podcast she has partnered with Spotify to produce. Of course, podcasts do have quite an earning potential, but usually they need to gain a larger audience before brands are willing to purchase advertisements. It is worth noting each of the seven streams that Lombard uses because they are quite popular avenues for income across the influencer space. The first is Adsense. Lombard explains that she can usually make her rent money through Adsense (she lives in Brooklyn, New York for context) or three to four times that amount. However, she is careful to warn listeners that depending upon the videos’ viewership and whether or not the content of the video causes it to get demonetized, she may only make a third of her rent money. As this income stream is relatively unpredictable, most influencers do not depend on Adsense for their income. The second revenue source for Lombard is brand deals. As I have explained, these are largely acquired and negotiated through the connections of management and influencer marketing agencies. According to Lombard, many of the brands that she works with purchase bundle deals which include not only a slot in whatever video she posts, but also a mention on her Instagram. The third option an influencer has for making money is with affiliate links. Lombard explains that an example is her Amazon shop, in which she picks out her favorite products and viewers can use the link in the script under her videos to go and purchase an item from that list. She then makes commission from those purchases, but warns that especially on Amazon, her yield is quite small. Most influencers, including Lombard, also have affiliate links for smaller brands. The fourth source of income is reselling clothing through a second hand selling application called Depop. I have tried to use this application myself, and it is worth noting that if no one knows you have opened an account on this app, few people will actually buy an item you are selling. Influencers like Lombard can promote their Depop account on their other social media and usually their items are sold within days. I suspect that part of this
rapid sale is the fact that creators like Lombard are somewhat known for their fashion sense and the other part is fueled by her celebrity, causing fans to want a piece of her. This concept carries for the fifth and sixth revenue streams, merchandise and brand partnerships. Both are acquired and negotiated through management agencies. Merchandise is contained usually within the influencer’s own store on their YouTube account, usually a t-shirt with some sort of catch phrase or identifiable symbol, while brand partnerships are typically an influencer-designed or inspired line within an already existing brand. The people consuming these products are usually the most dedicated fans. Finally, Lombard produces tattoo designs that viewers can purchase. While the specific product itself is not common, the concept is not altogether irregular. This revenue stream is also consistent with the idea that fans might want a design from Lombard because they enjoy her content and want to support her. Lombard shared this information with the expressed intent of sharing possible options with listeners who might want to follow a similar path to her. She ends this section of her podcast with a note of encouragement for listeners with an aspiration to become successful in the social media space, saying, “You can take any of your interests and use the internet to make a small business, to make a big business.” Lombard’s claim here exemplifies the promise of social media: if you follow your passion, and are indeed skilled enough in it, you (and anyone else) may become famous. In all of these revenue streams, the product is intimately linked to Lombard’s construction of identity. Fans can buy the very same products she is using in a video or shop her Depop to buy clothes she has worn. Lombard, in her dynamics and interactions with fans, is performing affective labor in creating an environment that feels welcoming for them, in which they feel they are participating in a positive community. This practice grows Lombard’s recognition as someone who is grateful for their fans and otherwise
trustworthy and appealing. This emotional capital can then be cashed in through the promotion of products that are given her stamp of approval, a dynamic from which she directly profits.

While using Lombard’s account of her own income streams in addition to the explanation regarding how influencers doing the work of influencing is meant to serve as mainly an orientation to what a career in social media might look like, it also serves to highlight a central illusion of social media fame. That is, social media fame is a new, more DIY form of celebrity. The question becomes, to what extent is social media fame new, unprecedented, unique? In this chapter, I explored two different dynamics of social media fame that are deeply intertwined: the structures that facilitate the production of celebrity in the context of social fame and an example regarding Lexie Lombard of how influencers might navigate those structures in order to earn an income. As we can see the structural environment of fame is largely unchanged, accompanied by the inequalities it contains, reflected in the experience of Okello explained in Chapter 3. What does prove unique, though, is the way in which influencers navigate that space. Their degree of success within these structures depends upon their ability to construct an identity that is favorable in the accruing of emotional capital.
CHAPTER 5: THE BROKEN DOWN AND REINFORCED STRUCTURES OF SOCIAL MEDIA FAME

The boundary between formerly much more distinct spaces has been broken down most extremely in the landscape of social media. Perhaps one of the most obvious examples is the boundary between advertising and content. As I explained in the previous chapter regarding modes of earning income and formal representation, social media stars have become the new frontier for marketing agencies wishing to target specific audiences through a form of marketing that more intimately engages the emotions of the audience. While YouTube and other platforms still make use of more traditional forms of advertising, such as pre roll and midroll ads which most closely resemble the commercials that divide a reality television show into sections. Influencers work brand partnerships into content in ways that are much more subtle, seemingly more similar to a recommendation from a friend than a commercial, as in the case of the affiliate links explained by Lombard.

The next boundary implicated in social media celebrity is more difficult to uncover: the boundary between the front and backstage of influencer performances. Hopefully, the previous chapters should have laid the groundwork for the understanding that this boundary is not as broken down as it might seem. As exemplified by these influencers’ connections to management teams and other traditional structures of celebrity production, extensive calculations are made regarding the influencers’ backstage performances. These activities are purposely obscured in the effort to uphold a perception of authenticity even though they are central to the understanding of
what an influencer is. Meanwhile, there is a sort of false backstage at play, especially in the case of influencers making use of a performance of relatability. As I have explained in the context of the case studies covered here, this pulling back of the curtain is also a constructed performance, done with the intention of fostering an emotionally charged para-social relationship between fans and influencers. Even these performances are calculations regarding the favorability of being seen as accessible and relatable.

This is a dynamic that is not at all new to the entertainment industry. Perhaps Jennifer Lawrence is a helpful example in understanding how construction of a front stage persona is not unique to the space of social media. On December 18, 2013, the then 23 year-old actress appeared on Conan O’Brien’s talk show to discuss a film she was promoting. Ultimately, what was most memorable about her appearance was an anecdote she told about a hotel maid finding her collection of butt-plugs while cleaning her room (Eggenberger, 2013). This combined with a series of “unintentional” but charming acts, like tripping while moving onstage at the 2013 Oscars, solidified Lawrence as a quirky and relatable personality. It is crucial, though, to not lose sight of the backstage negotiating that secured her appearance on Conan that night or the fact that she was there to promote a film from which she and many others would gain different forms of capital (symbolic, cultural, social, and financial).

Furthermore, it is important to understand the sex-toy anecdote as well as many of her other “quirky” slip ups as a carefully constructed front stage performance rather than a convenient slip of the curtain to expose the backstage (Goffman, 1956). Lawrence uses these performances of authenticity to promote the films she is in, the product that she is seeking to market. In the context of social media fame, these encounters with the relatable subject are the product, as in the cases of Chamberlain and Paytas. This dynamic functions to perpetuate the
myth of social proximity between creators and viewers by showcasing these sorts of individual quirks, while at the same time upholding the traditional forms of celebrity production that reproduce material distance between influencers and “regular people”.

Of course, there is a possibility that folks might see a picture you tagged them in, they might give you a shout out, or they might answer your direct message. These additional possibilities establish a feeling of connection without actually impacting the social proximity between fans and influencers. Chamberlain, like most of the influencers one can find on their public feeds on various social media platforms, lives in Los Angeles and works closely within the structures of traditional celebrity production. Ultimately, if this were an entirely new form of celebrity, there would not be a need to travel to Los Angeles to be able to access the highest tier of influencer status. The para-social relationships that facilitate the conversion of emotional and affective labor on the part of the influencer into emotional capital depend upon this illusion of proximity in order to function. While that which transforms influencers into celebrities are the embedded, traditional structures I have unpacked, building committed fans is foundational in even being able to access formal structures of celebrity. Influencers know this, and that is why they are constantly reinforcing a para-social bond between them and their fans. Influencers commonly express “love” for their followers or more extremely, the idea that they are one big family.

On her podcast, Chamberlain often speaks to the intensity of the experience of a comment section; there are people praising her, expressing deep affection and even obsession and at the same time there are commenters expressingly incredibly negative feelings toward her, that she is ugly or that her content is not as good as it used to be. This is at least part of the labor I am referring to, the effort put into trying to manage the emotions and opinions of fans towards
oneself. What makes them influencers is that they are able to effectively facilitate the conversion of this kind of labor into emotional capital, resulting in the successful manipulation of the audience’s emotions.

In exploring these dynamics as a series of boundaries that have either been reinforced or broken down allows for a multi-faceted critique of the narrative that social media fame is some sort of democratic, equal-opportunity marketplace. The boundaries separating “regular people” and especially marginalized folks from ascending to social media stardom are just as rigid, or even more rigid than ever. However, at the same time, the boundary between advertisement and content is broken down as a means to leverage emotional capital into economic capital. Furthermore, the boundary between fan and celebrity is intentionally blurred to help in the facilitation of this process.

CONCLUSION

While exploring the case studies we have considered so far, I happened upon an influencer who can actually be defined as “new”, @lilmiquela. Miquela is a “19- year- old” AI influencer, created on Instagram in April of 2016. In January of 2019, Lil Miquela’s creators closed a $125 million investment round led by SparkCaptial. As Kaitlyn Tiffany at Vox puts it,
“Suddenly, virtual influencers were the future of ads. The future of fashion. The future of commerce,” (Tiffany, 2019). While I just recently found the influencer’s page (boasting 3 million followers at this point) marketing firms, corporations, and media firms have been stoking her rise for years. I should also mention that AI celebrity has a longer history than Miquela, as Hatsune Miku, a Japanese popstar (and a Vocaloid sound bank) has been around since 2007 (Crypton Future Media).

Scrolling through her profile, it is relatively easy to forget that Miquela does not exist outside of the internet. Her Instagram bio reads:

“#BlackLivesMatter
Change-seeking robot with the drip”

But what does this mean without an actual individual operating in spaces outside of these accounts? Does Lil Miquela genuinely have a stake in a more liberated future as “online activism” would suggest or is the bio largely a product of market research done by artificial intelligence?

Of course, all of the influencers I have mentioned make these kinds of calculations in their construction of an

Figure 13: Post taken from LilMiquela’s Instagram
online persona. Many even make changes to their physical aesthetic arrangements, as in the case of those getting thousand dollar plastic surgery operations to achieve the “Instagram face” (Tolentino, 2019). In general, all influencers are performing some form of aesthetic, affective, and emotional labor in order to gain some sort of strong emotional response from their audiences. In the case of Lil Miquela and other AI influencers, this labor is not tied at all to a physical body. Miquela was “born” with an Instagram face.

It is almost haunting to consider the words of Hardt regarding how postmodern affective labor among groups of people closely mirrors computers and their ability to create artificial intelligence. These influencers don’t need to make an effort to keep their eye on the algorithms of the social media sites they inhabit, they mirror them in real time without the pesky restraint of human needs. They can reflect the values of a leftist online community without being directly impacted by any of these issues, without having a stake in change, simply reflecting a favorable aesthetic. Perhaps the most unsettling realization is that having the influencer be a product of AI does not actually change how we interact with them. We receive folks who are influencers as commodities. Of course, we might feel as though they are part of our communities, but largely, we are simply consuming their products of emotional resonance, aspiration, and the illusion of interconnectedness.

Through this study, I have argued that social media influencers gain celebrity in the online space by being able to convert emotional and affective labor into emotional capital through their construction of an emotionally charged “relationship” with their fans. Furthermore, this ability depends upon an influencer’s access to other forms of capital. This reality upholds systems of inequality, as otherwise privileged individuals have disproportionate access to this capital conversion. This process has been incredibly successful, evidenced in the amount of
people who follow influencers and express deep connection and feeling of the ability to access them in comment sections online. Marketing entities exploit this dynamic through influencer marketing. We consider the products because we trust the person promoting them. The rise of influencers like Lil Miquela beg the question: do we even need the promoting entity to be a person?

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