



Selected Papers of Internet Research 16:
The 16th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Phoenix, AZ, USA / 21-24 October 2015

THE LABOR OF VISIBILITY: GENDERED SELF-EXPRESSION IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA IMAGINARY

Brooke Erin Duffy
Temple University

Abstract

From fashion bloggers and beauty vloggers to virtual stylists and digital tastemakers, legions of enterprising young women are flocking to social media platforms with aspirations of capitalizing on their passion projects. Increasingly, their digitally mediated activities entail projections of what Banet-Weiser (2012) has called “the post-feminist self-brand,” which recasts self-expression and mediated visibility as conduits to female empowerment. Despite significant attention to the texts and contexts of gendered self-branding in recent years, further insight is needed to better understand the cultural implications for female social media producers. This paper draws upon in-depth interviews with digital content creators to explore the ambivalences and contradictions inherent in discourses of self-branding, authenticity, and social sharing. After mapping out the role of “ordinary people” in contemporary media culture, I address particular manifestations of “authenticity” and “realness” in the intersecting contexts of post-feminist and digital media milieus. I then present interview data to show how a mode of gendered unpaid work—*the labor of visibility*—increasingly structures activity in the social media imaginary.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the pervasive cult of entrepreneurship that has evolved in tandem with the internet economy, countless young women are utilizing social media in hopes of monetizing their “passion projects.” Elsewhere, I have described the activities of female fashion bloggers, beauty vloggers, and DIY producers through the framework of *aspirational labor*: “a form of (mostly) unpaid work that (1) participants believe has the potential to pay off in terms of future social/economic capital; and (2) ensures that female content creators remain immersed in the public circulation of commodities” (Duffy, 2015, p. 60).

Although their creative activities vary in form and scope, aspirational laborers are often compelled to project themselves according to what Banet-Weiser (2012) has called “the

Suggested Citation (APA): Duffy, B. E. (2015, October 21-24). The Labor of Visibility: Gendered Self-Expression in the Social Media Imaginary. Paper presented at Internet Research 16: The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, AZ, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

post-feminist self-brand,” which constructs self-expression and mediated visibility as paths to female empowerment (p. 64). Narratives of “ordinariness” are quite central to post-feminist self-branding activities and are symptomatic of the ubiquity of “authenticity” appeals in contemporary media and promotional culture.

“Real People” in Popular Culture

Academic inquiries into discourses of “realness” in popular culture have abounded over the last decade as scholars attempt to conceptually locate reality TV, docudramas, and user-generated content in the context of profound shifts in the economies, technologies, and markets of media production and consumption (Duffy, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Grindstaff, 2002; Turner, 2006). Reality TV has emerged as a particularly compelling site for researchers interested in mediated representations of “real people,” and a central line within this literature explores the myriad ways these representations are imbued with ideologies of gender, race, class, and sexuality (e.g., Grindstaff, 2002; Skeggs, 2009).

The so-called “democratization” of culture enabled by internet technologies has coincided with a heightened emphasis on public self-expression; the web 2.0 era, in particular, has been guided by an ethos of “authenticity” (Marwick, 2013). The authenticity ideal dovetails well with post-feminist narratives of individual expression and bodily display (Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova, 2013; Genz, 2014). As Banet-Weiser (2012) argues of female YouTube life-casters:

the labor of self-branding is thus economic in the sense that it relies on conditions of production of advanced capitalist societies, and it is cultural in that it invokes a more diffuse, immaterial labor that creates new cultural norms and outlooks about the ‘authentic’ self (p. 72).

Despite the insight of this scholarship, more research is needed to understand the cultural experiences of female social media producers *in their own voices*.

Method

Data for this project come from a sample of in-depth interviews that I conducted with 45 female social media producers (i.e., personal style bloggers, beauty vloggers, DIY designers) between 2013-2015. Interviews were semi-structured, and topics included participants’ backgrounds and expertise; career interests and aspirations; online and offline interactions with social media participants; processes of content creation, distribution, and promotion; and self-presentation strategies. After the interviews were transcribed, the content was coded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). Additionally, in order to understand the ways in which current and future digital media producers are socialized into the aspirational labor force, I drew upon a diverse series of blogger manuals and professional resources, including career manuals, online resources and support groups, and career guidance included in the blogs/vlogs themselves.

Key Findings: Authenticity, Expression, and the Labor of Visibility

As part of the governing social media logic of visibility, creative authors are compelled to create and maintain a conspicuous public persona. In fact, the professionalization resources I examined often state that social media success hinges on—as the header emblazoned on the back of one blog manual reads—*put[ting] yourself out there*. During interviews sessions, bloggers similarly referred to “get[ing] one’s name out there,” “putting it all out there,” and “getting yourself out there” as foundational elements of garnering an audience or landing a full-time gig. This aim was articulated through the display of presumably private moments and sentiments with current and potential followers. Indeed, in the genres of social media production examined in this study, the ideal of mediated visibility called for a dissolved boundary between one’s personal and professional lives in a way that assumed a traditionally feminine subjectivity. This binary framed how Carrie understood the self-presentation of a “good” blogger: one who is able to balance the personal and professional with great agility. As she continued, “being personal so people can feel like they’re actually...your friend almost when they read your blog, but also not too outwardly open where you’re trying too much.”

Directives to self-commodify one’s personal life generated a great deal of ambivalence among my interviewees. Some young people, such as full-time fashion blogger Becky, felt that this mode of public sharing was an accepted, and even gratifying, aspect of the profession. Of the “documentary-style” of the fashion blogger persona, she explained, “[Bloggers] are our own brand, and we kind of essentially have to sell our lifestyle. And so – yeah, there’s like a lot of work, I guess, that goes into different things... where I really document my personal life.” Here, Becky highlights the labor that goes into maintaining a digitally mediated persona.

Other informants explained the pressure they felt to express themselves according to a pre-defined script. Noting how blogs are a “personal extension of yourself,” Leah discussed the task of sharing intimate details of her personal life: “As I go on in life, I might be interested in different things...maybe I’ll have a baby, I don’t know if I’ll blog about that; I don’t know if that’s on brand for me or if I’d want to keep it private.” Leah thus expressed anxiety that a deeply personal experience—motherhood—might create a rift with the social media persona (“on brand”) she had created over the last half-decade or so.

In other instances, participants spoke more generally about the demand to broadcast their personal lives to mediated publics. Style blogger Kia was quite forthcoming about the personal stakes of a social media career. “One of the biggest cons I would say is that you always have to be *on*. Even when you’re taking a vacation, you can’t be like, “okay, Instagram’s just not going to be part of my life for a week.” She proceeded to describe her honeymoon, when she still faced the pressure to maintain her social media persona. For Kia, maintaining a division between personal and professional life is filled with tension; she added, “It’s just a very fine line to walk.”

Of course, not everyone was as responsive to the market logic of compulsory visibility. Naomi confessed that one of the reasons she waited so long to launch a blog was because she was “a little intimidated by the idea of putting myself on the internet.” She

acknowledged that the statement may seem peculiar for someone in her position—an aspiring model used to being in front of the camera; however, there was a level of personal disclosure that made her feel more vulnerable in the blogosphere. Grace, meanwhile, abandoned her blogging project because of the discomfort she felt from the self-disclosure obligation. As she shared, “I felt too self-conscious to do it; I feel like you have to really be, like, out there and want to pursue it. So, yeah I think that’s where I didn’t want to... continue [blogging], is when I didn’t want to, like, promote myself and take a bunch of pictures.”

Mediated visibility was particularly insidious for Jenna, as it exacted a high toll on her feelings of self-worth. As she confessed: “I’ve never been more overly concerned about my body than when I was a blogger. [The experience] very much turned me into this [person who was suddenly] like, ‘Oh my god, I need to lose weight.’” Comments such as this reveal how the much-vaunted imperative to “put oneself out there” is fraught with contradiction as social media producers must carefully tow the line between visibility and vulnerability, particularly as female producers who publish content in highly public digital spaces. While bloggers of all stripes are susceptible to online criticism and harassment, fashion and beauty bloggers may be easy targets of internet trolls *because of their collective culture of “putting themselves out there.”*

Conclusion

While women have long been compelled to express themselves intimately as part of a gendered confessional culture (Illouz, 2007), the ascension of social media has coincided with renewed emphases on (female) self-expression and sharing. These imperatives seem to fit comfortably with post-feminist logics of self-branding and entrepreneurialism; however, they require participants to perform the *labor of visibility*.

Like other forms of “free labor” that power the digital media economy (e.g., Terranova, 2000), the labor of visibility does not often provide material compensation; yet, it is unique in its potential social and psychological consequences. Indeed, what must be acknowledged is the extent to which this mode of “visibility” exposes young women to a level of public scrutiny that can double back and dampen their self-worth. At its worst, this takes the form of online trolling and cyber-bullying. While narratives of public/private blurring help to normalize this behavior and its potential consequences, it is precisely this bleeding together of one’s professional and personal spheres that makes social media creators vulnerable to mediated publics.

References

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic™: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Banet-Weiser, S. & Arzumanova, I. (2012). Creative authorship, self-actualizing women, and the self-brand. In C. Chris & Gerstner, D. (Eds.), *Media authorship* (pp. 163-179). New York: Routledge.

- Duffy, B. E. (2010). Empowerment Through Endorsement? Polysemic Meaning in Dove's User-Generated Advertising. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 3(1), 26-43.
- Duffy, B. (2015). Amateur, Autonomous, and Collaborative: Myths of Aspiring Female Cultural Producers in Web 2.0. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 32(1), 48-64.
- Genz, S. (2014). My job is me: Postfeminist celebrity culture and the gendering of authenticity. *Feminist Media Studies*, (ahead-of-print), 1-17.
- Gill, R. (2008). Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times. *Subjectivity*, 25: 432-445.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967/2009). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Grindstaff, L. (2002). *The money shot: Trash, class, and the making of TV talk shows*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Illouz, E. (2013). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Skeggs, B. (2009). The moral economy of person production: The class relations of self-performance on 'reality' television. *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), 626-644.
- Terranova, T. (2000). Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social text*, 18(2), 33-58.
- Turner, G. (2010). *Ordinary people and the media: The demotic turn*. London: Sage Publications.