Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age:
Fun, Free, and "Just Being Me"

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Over the past decade, work in the cultural sector has grown evermore precarious amid heightened competition, rampant insecurity, and the individualization of risk. Despite this, social media personalities—including bloggers, vloggers, and Instagrammers—seem to have attained a much-vaunted career dream: They get paid to do what they love. Accounting for this disparity, we highlight the role of popular media discourses that hype the possibilities of a career fashioned online. Our study draws on a qualitative analysis of more than 200 articles to reveal how these influencers circulate a patterned set of mythologies about creative work in the social media age. Such narratives about the fun, free, and authentic nature of their self-starter careers conceal less auspicious realities, including the demands for emotional labor, self-branding labor, and an always-on mode of entrepreneurial labor. Together, these myths help perpetuate an image of glamour in these industries as part of a "creativity *dispositif*" that both disciplines and incites cultural workers and aspirants.

Keywords: social media, labor, self-branding, creative industries, cultural production, Internet celebrity, influencers

In early 2016, *The Washington Post* published a feature on Vietnamese American nail artist and Internet sensation Myha Luong, better known by her Instagram moniker Lovely Mimi (McCoy, 2016). Like much popular coverage of social media personalities, the article "How to Become Internet-Famous in Under a Year" was less an instruction manual for fame-seekers and more of a pseudo-treatise on the democratic potential of digital media. Luong, a self-described "rebellious" adolescent who dropped out of high school as a pregnant teen, defied her scrappy roots to ascend to the coveted yet ever-elusive status

of Instagram celebrity. Within months, she had amassed more than a million Instagram followers; however, she downplayed any calculated status-seeking efforts by noting, "I don't know how they found me" (McCoy, 2016, para. 12). By early 2017, Lovely Mimi was peddling hair extensions on her personal website, hyping her latest single on iTunes, and promoting her upcoming appearance on the sixth season of VH1's reality show *Love & Hip Hop Atlanta* (Turner, 2017). She thus seemed to make the much longed for leap from "microcelebrity"—wherein individuals engage in an "amping up" (Senft, 2013, p. 25) of their popularity over the Web—to multimedia entrepreneur.

Lovely Mimi's rise to fame, we contend, is analogous to other popular narratives about social media celebrities—or to use the voguish term, "influencers"—published in recent years, including articles with such buzzy headlines as "Meet the YouTube Millionaires" (McAlone, 2016), "Average Internet Celebrities Make $75,000 per Instagram Ad and $30,000 Per Paid Tweet" (Novak, 2016), and "Millennial 'Influencers' Who Are the New Stars of Web Advertising" (Kay, 2017). Often, these articles emphasize the meritocratic potential of social media platforms: With enough talent, ostensibly anyone can secure a career in which labor and leisure blend. That is, they can get paid to do what they love—a phrase that Tokumitsu (2014) designated the "unofficial work mantra of our time" (para. 4).

Despite the cheering—even intoxicating—tone of such articles, the reality of work in the media and culture industries is much less glamorous. Often, creative laborers are located in industries and organizations marked by staggeringly high barriers to entry, periodic instability, and structural forms of inequality and discrimination (Blair, 2001; Freidman, Laurison, & Miles, 2015; Gill, 2010, 2014). Moreover, these workers are expected to engage in persistent forms of entrepreneurial labor, in which they internalize the risks of independent employment, roused by the "promise of one Big Job being right around the corner" (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005, p. 319). The rapid rise of the digital economy has done little to challenge the most formidable features of creative work; instead, recent scholarship suggests that new media technologies seem to amplify some of the less idealized features, including the itinerant nature (Gill, 2010), the reliance on discourses and practices of risk (Cohen, 2015; Neff, 2012), and the requisite blurring of one's personal and professional lives (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gregg, 2011). Taken together, these perspectives signal a patent disparity between the rhetoric of creative work—with its profound idealization of entrepreneurial careers enabled by social media—and the realities of precarious labor in the digital economy. We argue that media and popular culture discourses—particularly those shaped by social media's fame beneficiaries themselves—play a crucial role in mythologizing the possibilities of a career fashioned online. To better understand these discourses, we conducted a qualitative textual analysis of more than 200 articles published over a 10-year span that covered fashion bloggers, YouTube beauty vloggers, and Instagram influencers.

Our analysis revealed that these social media personalities circulate an interrelated series of mythologies about "work" in the age of social media, invoking the ideals of fun, authenticity, and creative freedom. Yet, such patterned narratives conceal the less auspicious elements of this work, including the demands for emotional labor, self-branding labor, and an always-on mode of entrepreneurial labor, all of which function as prerequisites for attaining these coveted proto-careers. We conclude by offering potential explanations for this mythology at the individual, industrial, and ideological levels. In particular, we argue that such mediated myths contribute to what McRobbie (2016) describes as the "creativity

dispositif" that both disciplines and incites contemporary cultural laborers, offering models for success—as well as a promise of hope—in an otherwise bleak employment landscape.[2]

Creative Work in the Digital Economy

Over the past two decades, as part of the academy's ostensible "turn to cultural work" (Banks et al., 2014, p. 3), scholars across the fields of media and communication, sociology, occupational studies, and higher education, among others, have examined the changing nature of media and creative labor (e.g., Friedman et al., 2015; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016; Neff et al., 2005). Whereas some of these studies delve into particular production cultures (e.g., Deuze, 2007; Duffy, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Mayer, 2011), another stream of research highlights the changing conditions of work for freelancers, contract hires, and interns (e.g., Corrigan, 2015; de Peuter, 2014; Frenette, 2013; Gill, 2010). Members of this swelling category of contingent workers confront long hours, temporary work arrangements, and the mentality that, as Blair (2001) put it, "You're only as good as your last [TV script, magazine article, commercial]" (see also Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Neff, 2012; Ross, 2009). Participants in the so-called "glamour labor" (Wissinger, 2015) industries of fashion, beauty, modeling, and lifestyle face a not dissimilar set of demands: the relentless nature of "keeping up appearances" and performing "aesthetic labor" to produce an image that projects one's status (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006; Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003), the need to constantly present one's "best self" to remain employable (Mears, 2011), and the expectation to appear fun and carefree despite labor conditions that are onerous or angst-producing (Wissinger, 2015).

As these and other studies have made clear, the emergence of digital and social media has radically reconfigured the nature of cultural labor. Offering an astute summary of some of the defining features of "new media work," Gill (2010) catalogued low pay, prolonged hours, long-term insecurity, and a demand for continuous self-training—attributes seemingly offset by a "love of the work." She also highlighted the importance of one's self-promotional activities: Workers seem to internalize a self-marketing orientation in which "life is a pitch." This imperative has only intensified amid a sprawling social media economy in which ideologies and practices of self-branding are paramount (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gershon, 2017; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013). As job seekers vie for work in a hypersaturated talent market, one's digital reputation becomes a form of currency (Cohen, 2015; Gandini, 2016; Gershon, 2017).

Collectively, these factors index a wider shift toward the politics of precarity, wherein earlier forms of bureaucracy and economic security are being eradicated in the face of post-Fordism, a structural transformation characterized by a "de-standardization of employment, de-unionization of labor, dis-aggregation of production, [and] de-industrialization of economies" (de Peuter, 2014, p. 5). To be sure, *precarity* is a highly contested term with overuse that threatens to "hinder the development of coherent

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[2] A *dispositif*, sometimes called an "apparatus," "device," or "construction," is a collection of interrelated forces that move and change in real time, forces which nevertheless form a framework or schema of positions and relationships that can be detected when one engages with them directly (see also, Deleuze, 1991).

political critique of digital labor by conflating the struggles of 'uberworked and underpaid gig workers'" (van Doorn, 2017, para. 8, citing Scholz, 2016) with more privileged workers, including artists and new media producers. Collapsing disparate forms of work under the "containing category of creativity" misses crucial differences in the types of labor under analysis (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005), and also subsumes issues that fall outside the domain of work into labor relations.[3] In an effort to disentangle this conceptual morass, de Peuter offers a typology of three precarious labor subjectivities, including the "cybertariat," Huws' (2003) conception of workers competitively innovating themselves out of existence within the informatization of capital; the "autonomous worker," conceived by Lazzarato (1996, p. 140) as both imperiled by and embracing work flexibilization, hoping that shouldering the burden of risk might bring unprecedented rewards; and finally, the "precog," that is, the "nonstandard cognitive worker" who "might have a prestigious occupation but labors under classic precarious conditions" (de Peuter, 2011, p. 420). "In its bid to cope," de Peuter (2011) observed, the precog "can adopt dispositions that make it not only a victim of post-Fordist capital but also a model subject of it" (p. 420). As we show in the following section, digital and social media content producers—including bloggers, vloggers, and Instagrammers—fit into the latter category.

New Models of Creative Work: Bloggers, Vloggers, and Influencers

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of a new archetype of career success, embodied by Internet personalities—fashion bloggers, YouTubers, and social influencers, among others—who seemingly make a living from their passion projects. Some scholars use the framework of microcelebrity (Senft, 2013) to call attention to online personalities' attention-seeking and reputation-management practices (Abidin, 2015; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016; Marwick, 2015). As Marwick (2015) summarizes, "In the broadcast era, celebrity was something a person was; in the Internet era, micro-celebrity is something people *do*" (p. 140). Other researchers have drawn on in-depth interviews and participant observation to highlight the immaterial labor demanded of bloggers and influencers. To maintain their socially mediated personae, these individuals seem compelled to express passion (Duffy & Hund, 2015), feign devotion to retail brands and sponsors (Duffy, 2017; Rocamora, forthcoming), and maintain a level of intimacy with readers, viewers, and fans (Abidin, 2015; Cunningham & Craig, 2017). Such self-branding and positioning work is particularly endemic in what Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017) articulate as "aesthetic entrepreneurialism," a feminized endeavor of styling, adorning, and transforming oneself to create a subject who is "autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating" (p. 39).

Critical studies of bloggers and influencers support and extend earlier sociologies of the glamour labor industries, which emphasize the distinctive hiring structures (entry through unpaid, speculative work); their heavy reliance on image as a proxy for success (where workers struggle to be the person who appears as their online, curated, filtered persona); the paramount placed on the aesthetics of that image; and their demand for a seamless melding between the personal and professional. As *precogs*, bloggers, vloggers, and Instagrammers have careers subsidized by passionate satisfaction and heightened social status, rather than stable, full-time employment; their reliance on sponsorships and appearance fees

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[3] These issues include bare survival under neoliberal and biopolitical pressures, as per Butler (2006, 2010; discussed in Watson, 2012).

makes work intermittent and unpredictable; and they depend on the whims of a mercurial fan base as they vie to stay visible and relevant. But while astonishing success is the exception rather than the rule, popular media nevertheless seem to lavish attention on those who have achieved a much-vaunted career dream: They get paid to do what they love. Courting this discursive positioning, we contend, is a key part of these workers' jobs—and one that maintains their status as exemplary worker-subjects.

Method

Our study draws on a qualitative textual analysis of popular media coverage of social media-enabled careers that was published over a 10-year span (2006–2016). Using the LexisNexis database, we conducted a search query of international (English-language) articles for *profession* or *career* cross-listed with each of the following terms: *Instagram* (223 documents), *fashion* and *model* (997 documents), *fashion blog* (418 documents), and *beauty vlog* (366 articles).[4] Although the question of what constitutes "popular" media is increasingly difficult to pin down in an age of ubiquitous online news and information, we opted to analyze news articles/features for two reasons: (1) Mediated depictions of media and creative industries play a critical role in discursively positioning these fields at the imagined "center" of the social world (Couldry, 2003; see also Neff, 2012); and (2) popular media articles have a wider, less specialized audience than content creators' self-authored content channels. Given that this audience is likely less familiar with the Internet personalities, media expositions tend to focus more on their career trajectories and professional experiences. The first 100 articles from each set (organized by relevance) were coded. We subsequently eliminated duplicates, discussions that were irrelevant to our search (e.g., "role models" in a search for models), and those texts that failed to engage with digital/social media. We supplemented these data with news and feature articles collected over the past five years on the broader topics of "social media" and "work" catalogued by both authors for their individual studies. We decided to include these curated collections to broaden the search beyond the LexisNexis purview and to provide context for the specific fashion/beauty/glamour focus of our initial data set.

Our final sample consisted of more than 200 articles, and researchers coded the sets of articles independently. The qualitative coding schema was guided by a preliminary review of the data and included the following categories: (1) showcasing one's private life, (2) the blurring of work/play, (3) parties/networking/socialization, (4) freedom/flexibility, (5) authenticity and self-expression, (6) image-building and self-promotion, (7) relating to audiences, (8) partnerships with retail brands and other media industries, and (9) career aspirations and narratives about "breaking in" or "getting discovered." Using a grounded theory approach with its simultaneous processes of data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we further refined the concepts inductively to develop the categorical themes that we present below.

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[4] These particular subfields, we contend, represent the most visible instances of the digital glamour industries.

Mythologies of Creative Work

Our findings revealed that workers mythologize their careers through discourses of fun, authentic self-expression, and creative freedom. In analyzing these patterned narratives, we contend that they gloss over a less-prodigious reality, whereby worker-subjects must engage in persistent emotional labor, continuous reputation management and self-branding, and the presentation of an entrepreneurial subject who does it all. To see where the demands to disguise the work inherent in "glamour labor" are at play, as well as to highlight the mythologizing tendencies deployed by the laborers themselves, we turn to examples from our sample of media articles.

"I'm Having So Much Fun!": The (Emotional) Labor of Love

The Internet personalities chronicled in our sample were effusive about the characteristically enjoyable aspects of their careers, and they often attributed these "dream jobs" to a strike of good fortune. Of her proudest achievement, Irish beauty blogger Ciara O'Doherty offered, "Getting to do what I love every day and calling it 'work' is amazing. I'm always pinching myself. I don't take it for granted" (Becca, 2015, para. 15). O'Doherty added of her new morning TV gig, "I style and showcase looks from some of my favourite brands, it's lots of fun!" (Becca, 2015, para. 3). Similarly, British beauty blogger Dawn Higgins reflected on the privilege of getting invited for a sneak peek at an upcoming collection—an experience she described as "a real pinch-me moment" ("Personal Stylist," 2011). This same allusion appeared in a feature on New Zealand blogger Amanda Shadforth. When asked to speculate about the source of her fashion blog's astounding popularity, Shadforth offered, "I don't really know and still have to pinch myself at the success of the site" (Lee, 2014, para. 11). The gratitude of workers calculatedly in awe at their own run of luck feeds into the myth of chance success, implying that if they could get lucky, so could anyone.

Workers were also unreserved in their praise for professions that enabled them to pursue their so-called passions. For instance, an article detailed how Australian Instagrammer Alyce Cowell self-fashioned a career that married her interests in fashion and writing. As she reflected, "Being able to combine my loves is an absolute dream. You can express yourself and feel fantastic at the same time." Sharing the history of her professed "passions," she continued, "I've always considered myself a creative type, and find fashion [to be] incredible fun" (Domjen, 2011, para. 1). As Cowell's account makes clear, workers routinely cast their professions as work that *does not seem like work*; instead, it is portrayed as a hobby they would pursue even without financial remuneration. This is a key point: paid labor smacks of the kinds of wage labor drudgery these workers report being happy to leave behind; instead, we are reminded by YouTuber Alfie Deyes that working "every hour in the day" is "fun":

> It's not about the money. . . . The only difference between it being my job and not being my job is that I have more time to put into it. It allows me to have every hour in the day to put into making YouTube videos, which is exactly what I want. I'm having so much fun. (Marr, 2014, para. 7)

Indeed, even in those instances in which creators peeled back the curtain on less idealized elements of the profession—the high levels of dedication and long hours—expressions of passion were offered to explain why the article subjects worked so uncompromisingly. As a YouTuber offered of the slow takeoff of her site, "I was never worried about how fast I was growing because I was making content that I was passionate about and it was more of a hobby for me—in many ways, it still is" (Devlin, 2016, sec. "Tips," para. 3).

In a similar vein, tween fashion blogger-turned feminista/actress/online magazine creator Tavi Gevinson framed her work as a "labor of love," justifying, "Even though it was summer break and I got no sleep, putting the book together has definitely been a labor of love. I couldn't wait to get to the library every morning to work on it" (Morfoot, 2012, para. 3). In another instance when the rhetoric of love and passion was used to rationalize conditions of overwork, Irish model/deejay Vogue McFadden explained how she "loves" the hectic pace: "I think I would drive myself insane if I wasn't doing something at every second of the day. I like being as busy as I am, and I just love it" ("The Model Bloggers," 2015, para. 12).

Importantly, such allusions to "dream jobs," "passion projects," and "labors of love" highlight a far less dazzling truth about the social media workstyle: It requires a persistent performance of sentiment. Emotional labor is thus a requirement for success, compelling the individual to produce a particular (often work-prescribed) emotion in herself to inspire a desired feeling in another (Hochschild, 1983). For content creators who spend their lives in the presence of socially mediated audiences, the compulsion to simulate or, better yet, actually feel a particular sentiment is a job requirement. Consistent with this stance, performances of passion and sociality were frequently coupled with humble gratitude; workers were reportedly "amazed" and felt "blessed" at their luck. As Australian model Ruby Rose offered, "Being among the who's who of the fashion industry, sitting with all these international guests and then watching a runway while eating dinner, that's an example of why this job is amazing" ("Roses," 2011, paras. 9–10). Humbling themselves in this way pays off through a self-effacement that belies the time, effort, and capital it often takes to break into this world (Duffy, 2017).

As London fashion blogger/stylist Angie Smith pointed out, "a warm, friendly personality is a must if you want to get on in this industry" (Wilson, 2013, para. 5). And, indeed, the labor of (public) relationship-building has taken on a new urgency for cultural workers expected to ratchet up followers, friends, and likes. Yet, in keeping with the need to conceal the energy expended on such "relational labor" (Baym, 2015), social media creators cast these connections as more important than money; getting paid was almost an afterthought, as per Deyes' comment "it's not about the money." It is in this vein that Chinese blogger Daphne Charice claimed that she was inspired to keep an active Instagram feed to ensure that her "followers feel like they can relate to my postings on fashion, music and life stories—experiences and opinions that are sometimes emotional, sometimes motivating" (Kamal, 2015, p. 8). Of course, such statements mask the fact that these affective/emotional relationships are financially incentivized by the digital attention economy.

"Just Being Me": The Promotional Labor of Authenticity

At the same time that content creators praised the fun, fulfilling nature of their social media-enabled professions, they also lauded careers that enabled them to be themselves. As YouTube star GiGi Dubois noted in response to a question about the best part of her job, "not caring what people think and just being me and posting it!" (Starngage, n.d., para. 8). Style blogger Natalie Joos, similarly, rejected the temporal cycle of fashion to play up her inner self-expression: "I don't adhere to trends. I just do my thing" (Pithers, 2012, para. 9). Such accounts highlight the resonant ideals of realness and authenticity in the social media age (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Marwick, 2013; Pooley, 2010). As fashion and lifestyle blogger Fiona Milne observed, "I think that's what appeals to people[:] when you speak the truth and you're authentic" (Merten, 2007, p. 54).

Accordingly, content creators outwardly rejected any calculated attempts to build their social media personae. Tavi Gevinson noted the importance of being herself in a *Hollywood Reporter* feature:

> I realize that the things I find beautiful are the things that are weird. Then I know I don't have to be perfect, or gorgeous, or pretty. I just have to be the same kind of thing that would make me excited about being a human. That's just being yourself, and it's great. (Chan, 2015, para. 7)

Similarly, YouTube sensation Tyler Oakley explained in a *TIME* feature,

> Since the beginning I have always tried to just be me. There have been moments in my career as a YouTuber where I've recognized that I'm trying to emulate something else . . . and I realize that's not what I want to be putting out. (D'Addario, 2015, para. 4)

Other vloggers described how they eschewed canned performances and repudiated the slick aesthetics of traditional media. Bethany Mota, in a *Times of India* piece counseling "How to Go From a Nobody to a Social Media Somebody," made this directive clear: "Let the bloopers stay. Who wants to watch somebody who is always perfect? Be human. My fans expect it. I mess up all the time. Being imperfect is normal on YouTube" (Irani, 2015, para. 5). YouTuber Shannon Harris similarly relayed, "I make my videos just as much for you as for me. . . . No one is going to like every single look but that's just life" (Devlin, 2016, para. 1). Although these digital media personalities celebrate being true to themselves, the acknowledgment of audiences in their comments (i.e., "fans") is a testament to what Pooley (2010) has called "calculated authenticity" in which, through self-work, authenticity becomes "a means to the end of self-promotion" (p. 78).

The promotional value of authenticity is particularly evident in a comment from Lianne Texeira, the YouTube creator of alter ego/fashion detective "Alisha." She advised, "Don't write about something everyone else is already doing. Avoid covering famous artists and designers. And follow your instincts and personal style; like Alisha, don't follow trends. Be honest to your art" (Singh, 2016, para. 7). Here, "honesty" is used to signal individual self-expression *as well as* an instrumental way to establish a brand niche (avoiding what "everyone else is already doing"). This niche-building "authenticity" mandate was

also evident in blogger Margaret Zhang's explanation for her site's success: "I think it's important to have genuine, authentic, original content that nobody else has, not to emulate anybody else's style and not to look around too much for inspiration from the same field" (Waterhouse, 2014, para. 4).

Expressions of authenticity also framed interactions with branded goods, signaling the expectation that influencers only endorse products they already use (Duffy, 2017; Rocamora, forthcoming). Thus, although British blogger Danielle Wightman-Stone declared that getting "sent lovely shoes and handbags to write about" is a "nice perk," she is quick to point out, "I only blog about items I like and make sure users know when I've been sent them [from a brand or advertiser]" (Wilson, 2013, para. 7). Here, again, emotional labor and calculated authenticity are evident as content creators insist that their sentiments in sponsored posts are genuine, because they blog about a product only if it fits with who they "really" are. Deflecting potential critiques of "selling out," vlogger Jamie Berger offered, "I want my subscribers to trust me. If I were to endorse products I didn't use or like it would be apparent and it would come off very fake" (Kopun, 2015, para. 44).

In other instances, narratives of unexpected, accidental fame helped to refute notions of deliberately staged personae. As the blogger behind Oracle Fox remarked, "It's almost an accident that [the site] has ended up where it is today. I think [my blog] was a natural progression for me as an artist and is a wonderful way to engage with a different audience as well as the artistic community" (Lee, 2014, para. 7). The ideal of unanticipated success was also apparent in a comment by the founder of the Budget Fashionista blog, who chronicled her path as follows:

> It was basically by mistake. I never planned for it to be this way. When I started my blog, blogs weren't what blogs are now. People were like, "What's a blog?" I really just started it as a way to communicate with friends about these things I was finding while shopping and a way for me to help curtail my own spending. I am still surprised that people read me and that advertisers want to work with me. (Huegenin, 2007, para. 1)

In each of these cases, the individual was seemingly driven by authentic, creative self-expression when success "found" them. By disavowing calculated, entrepreneurial ambitions, content creators encourage individuals to have blind faith in their own creative impulses, thereby maintaining the flow of new material crucial to the ongoing viability of the marketplace. Yet, despite the effusive praise for "being me," maintaining a consistent persona that withstands the whims of everyday life amounts to consistent persona maintenance. Burnishing the self-brand is above all a form of labor that, explains Hearn (2008), involves an "outer-directed process of highly stylized self-construction, directly tied to the promotional mechanisms of the post-Fordist market" (p. 201). Indeed, these content creators must be vigilant in their efforts to remain "on brand," lest they risk losing audiences and, ultimately, advertisers.

To be sure, there were a few moments when deliberate attempts to build or manage one's persona were laid bare. For instance, one blogger revealed the strategic nature of content timing: "I realised that between 5 and 10 pm was the best time to post a selfie, and it would have a higher chance of making the popular posts page, which then gets you thousands of followers" ("Insta-nt Celebrity,"

2013, para. 8). Such thoughtful strategizing belies the casual look and feel of such posts, which are carefully created, curated, and placed to appear candid.

"I Do Everything Myself": The Entrepreneurial Labor of Doing It All

As independent workers *par excellence*, the bloggers, vloggers, and influencers in our sample routinely valorized the autonomy, flexibility, and even transience of their self-starter careers. Atlantic-Pacific creator Blair Eadie was thus grateful for a job in which "every day at work is different" ("Blogger Spotlight," 2010, para. 9). Instagrammer Daphne Charice, meanwhile, denigrated the banality of a more conventional career path: "I have always admired professional careers like engineering, architecture and dentistry—at least a stable 9-to-5 job—but I realised somewhere along the way that such a path wouldn't work well with me. I just wasn't born for it" (Kamal, 2015, p. 8). Here, both Eadie and Charice laud enterprising careers that enable them to circumvent the bureaucracy and rigidity of a "traditional" work environment. Even when acknowledging the downside of leaving the 9-to-5 behind, so-called superblogger Gala Darling invoked the mythos of passionate work: "People think blogging is a great way to leave the nine-to-five behind, but I probably work many more hours than most people in office jobs" (Warrington, 2013, para. 17). She then qualified this with a telling statement: "The difference is, I love every minute.".

In a nod toward wider culture's fetishization of entrepreneurship, social media personalities reflected on the benefits of retaining complete control over their business ventures. In an editorial, British YouTuber Tanya Burr (2014) offered the following account of the creative process:

> Uploading a YouTube video is so satisfying. They take a while to film and edit, but I love the creativity of deciding what they're going to be about, and the technical parts, like editing, too. I do everything myself—my channel is my baby. (para. 3)

YouTuber Lauren Riihimaki similarly explained, "I do the entire process myself, beginning with brainstorming the video concept, collecting the supplies from an assortment of retailers, and filming the entire process with the occasional help from either my boyfriend or my dad" (Israelson, 2014, para. 17). Riihimaki fulfills, or at least appears to fulfill, the roles of art director, stylist, videographer, and talent. To be sure, cultural workers of all stripes are expected to have myriad proficiencies (e.g., Deuze, 2007) and engage in entrepreneurial labor (Neff et al., 2005); however, the latest iteration involves publicly embracing and celebrating one's multiskill persona. Such accounts of "doing it all" perpetuate an image of a pure creative visionary whose products are undiluted by the contributions of others. Glamourizing the protean work style also serves to exonerate (intentionally or not) the kind of overwork and self-extension required to woo the affection of a capricious and fickle boss: the audience. And, indeed, fans of social media personalities reportedly feel duped when they find out their favorite blogger or vlogger has solicited help with their "independent" creative projects. In 2014, for instance, YouTube vlogger Zoe Suggs received significant backlash from fans who were surprised to learn that her book *Girl Online* was coauthored by a ghost writer (Awford, 2014).

Moreover, presenting oneself as a do-it-all, multiskilled maven suggests independence from the platforms to which their brand persona is hitched (e.g., YouTube or Instagram). As blogger Brianne Garcia

noted, "The social-media sites we post on now will also likely be obsolete in a digital minute. Defining your work by the technology that displays it is futile" (Meder, 2014, para. 18). Relatedly, model Bree Warren pointed out, "You have to be much more than just a model these days. You have to be a social media player, a brand, a negotiator, a manager, a fresh face and a travel veteran" (Kehren, 2014, para. 4). This structural directive captures the importance of entrepreneurialism in a new key. Whereas self-enterprising workers could once stay ahead by honing skills in their given area of expertise, they are now compelled to respond every time a new platform emerges. Workers are therefore impelled to accept—even enjoy—the type of career transitions associated with the independent economy because their identity as creative branded personae depends on it.

Discussion and Conclusion

The emergence and growth of the digital economy has incited a vibrant dialogue about the changing culture and conditions of work. These discourses vary extensively in nature and scope, but media coverage of a particular subset of cultural producers—fashion bloggers, vloggers, and Instagram influencers—is rife with optimism. Our analysis of such coverage reveals the extent to which these Internet personalities actively participate in this mediated lauding, in part by circulating a patterned set of myths about themselves and their proto-careers. However, in constructing their work as an amalgamation of pleasure, authentic self-expression, and autonomy, they systematically conceal the less idyllic realities of creative work in the social media age. We contend that mythologizing the possibilities of a career fashioned online is crucial to their image-building, casting themselves as "model subjects" while prodding others to follow in their path.

Overwhelmingly, the social media content creators we examined expressed intense feelings of pleasure and fun, emphasizing that "work" is a labor of love, with compensation as a mere afterthought. The apparent pleasure of these jobs was especially discernible in their declarations of luck, including allusions to serendipitous success and "pinch me, I must be dreaming" moments. The persistent performance of positive sentiment revealed an investment in emotional labor to present a likable persona, which, as some intimated, is necessary to attract substantial followings. Moreover, within this rhetoric of love, luck, and passion, rationalizations of overwork seeped through: Work stretched to all hours of the day as the division between personal and professional was rendered invisible (Gregg, 2011).

In addition to invocations of fun and luck, social media producers celebrated the valuable stance of authenticity: Work entails "just being me," thereby obscuring any kind of job-related drudgery. But although appeals to "realness" and "sincerity" seem to have all the trappings of inner-directed self-expression, passing references to audiences (and hence advertisers/sponsors) reveal the calculated nature of such authenticity appeals (Pooley, 2010). In other words, the quest to remain perennially on brand requires a deft performance of one's image, one that requires considerable self-branding labor (Banet-Weiser, 2013; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2008). Undoubtedly, this work of persona maintenance is crucial to gaining followers and fans—the economic life-blood of their online careers.

Finally, cheering accounts of "doing it all" capture the demands of the post-Fordist economy and, in particular, the expectation that workers furnish multiple proficiencies, flexibility, and cross-platform

tech savvy. At first blush, a career in which "every day is different" sounds exhilarating; however, projecting such excitement necessarily camouflages the radically unstable, profoundly taxing nature of these enterprising careers. Similar to the "labile laborers" examined by Morgan and Nelligan (2015), namely those who seem to internalize the "individualistic and competitive structures of the new economy" (p. 68) through professional pliability, these entrepreneurial laborers put a positive spin on onerous requirements. Projecting a relaxed ease while shouldering these burdens secures a total ownership of the product—a stance necessary to producing an image of self-enterprise and sense of being primed for a career that spans industries and platforms. After all, ensuring that all creative credit goes to them alone is vital to their overall brand persona. In actuality, agents, publicists, and a coterie of invisible "behind-the-brand" workers may help to burnish this image across the sprawling social media ecology (Duffy, 2017, p. 215).

Taken together, these narratives cloak the more troubling elements of independent employment, including chronic instability, the absence of benefits and training, and a lack of organized support/worker protections (Lane, 2011; Neff, 2012; Ross, 2009). Upbeat accounts of socially mediated success also serve to gloss over how the "politics of insecurity" (Huysmans, 2006; see also Beck, 1992) affect categories of workers unevenly: Low-wage and low-status workers are especially disadvantaged by the forces of worker individualization that are celebrated in popular media (e.g., Smith, 2016). The digital version of this lopsided structure amounts to what Ross (2013) described as a "jackpot economy" where media focus above all on the "winners" of prized fame—despite the fact that existing markers of privilege are often prerequisites for success.

To be sure, the notion of being plucked from obscurity and thrust into the limelight is a well-worn trope in media coverage of celebrity (Lowenthal, 1961). Yet, today, this mythos shrouds the less providential reality of the social media economy. In particular, those at the receiving end of good fortune are already well positioned for luck to strike: They have existing markers of social and economic privilege as well as the type of aesthetics familiar to the "glamour industries" (Wissinger, 2015; see also Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2017). Therefore, the ideal of luck draws attention away from the machinations of success already in place, including one's social location. Saying "just lucky, I guess" makes it seem as though anyone could be so fortunate. Any revelation that the lucky few are structurally placed for fortune to strike threatens to weaken the strong pull for new aspirants—those who provide the crucial fan base necessary to keep the whole enterprise up and running.

In closing, we offer potential explanations for why these workers consistently present an image of social media labor in disparity with the precarious realities of creative employment. Such explanations address the individual, industrial, and ideological logics of social media labor, but they by no means function independently. At the individual level, these myths serve the bloggers, vloggers, and Instagrammers whose success is bound up with the creation and maintenance of a particular branded persona. Circulating these and other stories about themselves makes them more relatable, a requisite emotional stance crucial to "making it" in these domains. Moreover, these individuals are working in industries that demand the appearance of glamour to attract followers and thus sponsors; yet, "glamour labor" by definition entails work that is concealed to outsiders (Wissinger, 2015). Thus, the world these

workers inhabit seems like a dream because, for the enterprise to function, it has to look like one: filtered, soft-edge glamour is heightened by pushing the work from view.

And finally, these mediated myths fulfill an ideological function in their representation of the so-called "new economy" to various publics; such mediated discourses function as part of what McRobbie (2016) identified as a "creativity *dispositif*" that both encourages and disciplines laboring subjectivities for a radically unstable economy. Indeed, the digital creative economy depends on the belief that social media work is easy and potentially profitable; hope is hitched to a utopian, albeit depoliticized, promise (Weeks, 2011). By presenting the careers of digital influencers, microcelebrities, and the instafamous as both desirable and viable, aspiring creators are encouraged to toil in exchange for autonomy, excitement, visibility, and passion. The activities of the latter are driven by the hope that they, too, might win huge followings that will allow them to command the fees that these workers garnered "just by luck," all while being themselves. Participation in this system requires their investments of time, energy, and content—all of which help to sustain the circuits of digital capitalism.

In sum, the mythologies we have described here contribute to a wider discourse of a digital world—one that seems far removed from the realities of "gig-ified" employment. In fact, the laborers in our study work very hard to distance themselves from this kind of precarity, managing and coping with their own circumstances in ways that produce them as both victims and model subjects of the system in which they toil. As we argued, these workers are best conceptualized as precogs, the nonstandard cognitive workers in prestigious occupations who nevertheless labor under "classic precarious conditions" (de Peuter, 2011, p. 420). Despite the glamorous aura, bloggers, vloggers, and Instagrammers cope with uneven or intermittent pay, fluctuating fan bases, and intense demands to self-innovate to keep up with constantly evolving means for producing and promoting their self-brands.

This coping mechanism, however, involves self-presentation as exemplary worker-subjects, untroubled by these precarious conditions, while in fact embracing them. Taking this stance is crucial to creating an image of fun, free, and authentic work that conceals its inauspicious realities. In so doing, these workers actively create a mythos that intentionally grows their fan bases, while inadvertently serving a larger ethos that disciplines and incites would-be cultural laborers to try their hand at this kind of work. Creating a scrim that clouds perceptions of the deinstitutionalized, individualized, and demanding reality of the work, these mythologies sustain and justify a world of "Insta-glam" for the very few, by presenting it as a democratic path to success available to all.

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