

“We’re Not Just Telling Stories, We’re Changing Lives”: Dhar Mann’s Progressive Neoliberalism

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This article focuses on the work of Dhar Mann, a “megainfluencer” based in Los Angeles who makes videos that encourage viewers to treat others fairly and with compassion. However, the narratives he produces are rooted in fantasy, ignore/obscure the role of capitalism in the cultural construction of everyday power relations in the United States, and, in turn, uphold “progressive-neoliberal” ethics glossed with kindness and a depoliticization of everyday life as solutions to individual and social problems.

Keywords: social media, neoliberalism, influencers, discourse, ethics

Over a span of 20 years, beginning with Friendster and MySpace, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have come to compose a communicative infrastructure through which people discursively constitute the cultural practices of everyday life. With social media’s affordances, the production and circulation of content and feedback have been given even greater reach than before. Through those practices, a range of users deploy, uphold, and challenge discourses of power that are at work in the construction of social relations and subjects (Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001; Foucault, 1990). Scholars in the late 20th and early 21st centuries who have studied TV and digital communication technologies have elucidated how the logics of neoliberalism have been reinforced and justified through media (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Ashman, Patterson, & Brown, 2018; Bishop, 2019; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016; Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

Social media influencers reproduce the neoliberal capitalist rationales and practices that have produced *them* (e.g., entrepreneurialism), in which their subjectivities are constructed within a context of monetization and self-branding (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Ashman et al., 2018; Hopkins, 2019; Khamis et al., 2016). Such qualities can be observed in the work of Dhar Mann in the United States and Varun Pruthi in India, who encourage viewers to treat people at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy with compassion and respect. However, both Mann and Pruthi have also individualized responsibility over social welfare and promoted the idea that having “good character” (which includes being kind and diligently working within the economic system) will lead to happiness and even financial success.

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This article is focused on the work of Dhar Mann, an entrepreneur based in Los Angeles who has become an online celebrity using YouTube, and later, Facebook and Instagram. Mann's stories have involved interpersonal relationships between romantic partners, friends, family members, coworkers, employees and their superiors, customers and workers, and the wealthy and impoverished and have emphasized behaviors and characteristics such as compassion, charity, loyalty, and self-determination. Analyzing his work can help us to further explain the complicated ways in which social media influencers play a discursive role in the construction of neoliberal selves and societies. This is particularly important in the contemporary moment, given how neoliberal governance has been challenged by the global rise of left-liberal and authoritarian right-wing populisms throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s. At the same time, the centrality of "free markets" has remained intact and is being strengthened (Peck & Theodore, 2019). This dynamic demonstrates how "neoliberalism" is not an immutable set of rationales and practices but is emergent within historical sociocultural conjunctures (Peck & Theodore, 2019; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2012).

Mann's videos have been produced within those historical moments under the conditions of "actually existing neoliberalism," which is an approach to understanding the concept of neoliberalism in ways that are specific to local contexts (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Beyond the basic tenets of neoliberal ethics, Mann has provided his audiences with "progressive neoliberal" (Fraser, 2017) *moral* guidance and support in the face of increasing costs for basic necessities, economic inequality, austerity, strained worker-employer relations, greater competition for well-paying jobs, and political conflict in the United States. Those sociocultural tensions have had effects on a range of institutions and areas of American social life, such as our intimate friendships, family ties, workplace relationships, and community networks, which are the on-the-ground sites of social reproduction and have been represented in Mann's videos by fantasy-driven images and narratives. Mann asks us to lean into meritocracy, kindness, and a depoliticization of everyday life, to manage individualized and larger problems in society. The next section will discuss the place of social media influencers, and Mann in particular, within the discursive frameworks of cultural production and power.

Social Media Influencers and Cultural Power

With the changes that social media technology has made to the terrain on which social and cultural production has taken place, which was previously dominated by commercial broadcasting, barriers to opportunities to produce and distribute media have dropped. Among those who have leveraged the power of social media platforms were entertainers and well-known entrepreneurs who had advantages over ordinary users as the "influencer" began to emerge as a feature on the digital landscape. For example, Paris Hilton's social media career was established in the 2000s, when MySpace was the platform of the day (Marcus, 2018). Since then, Hilton developed her social media presence into a lucrative business by conveying authenticity and accessibility to build relationships with her followers (Marcus, 2018). As a part of the late-20th and early-21st century culture industry, Hilton, and others such as Kim Kardashian, have cultivated highly visible online presences that expanded the reach they already had through tabloids, TV, and film.

Hilton, Kardashian, and other mainstream popular culture personalities may have generated greater levels of fame using social media platforms, but their successes had largely been built on Instagram. As of the first week of January 2023, Hilton and Kardashian had 21.4 million and nearly 339 million followers, respectively. However, their YouTube channels were not nearly as robust: Kardashian had just under 2 million subscribers

and Hilton had 1.25 million. Hilton and Kardashian were nearly household names, yet the social media environment had produced even bigger stars on YouTube that general audiences may have never even heard of. Mr. Beast is one of those content creators, who had more than 126 million subscribers and has been extremely popular among young people. The category that Hilton, Kardashian, and Mr. Beast belong to is known as "megainfluencers," which refers to those who have 1million or more followers, friends, and/or subscribers of/on/to their social media profiles, accounts, and/or channels (Turner, 2020).

Although not as well-recognized as those mentioned above, Mann has achieved megainfluencer status across the major platforms. In early January 2023, Mann had 17.6 million YouTube subscribers, 29 million Facebook followers, 4.7 million followers on Instagram, 15.1 million followers on TikTok, and the Instagram page for Dhar Mann Studios had 1.2 million followers, which amounted to a total of just more than 67 million followers and subscribers. In the mid-to-late 2010s and early 2020s, online celebrity was becoming more recognized in the mainstream, as indicated by the development of TV programs such as *The D'Amelio Show* (Ontiveros, 2021), which has aired since 2021 on the Disney-Comcast-NBC Universal streaming outlet Hulu and followed Charli and Dixie D'Amelio, sisters who had become famous on TikTok for their viral dance videos.

Regardless, there are still perceived hierarchies. Cenk Uygur, founder and host of the online news network The Young Turks (2021), had pointed them out in commentary pertaining to comic TV and film star Pete Davidson's treatment of YouTuber Logan Paul and lesser-known influencer Ben Askren while Davidson was emceeing a 2021 boxing match between the two streamers. Uygur, whose network YouTube channel had more than 5 million subscribers, took issue with Davidson's remarks, when the latter accused Jake Paul of having entitlement issues due to his poor behavior and legion of "followers," and asserted that "'real celebrities' [did] not like" him (The Young Turks, 2021, 6:30). Uygur noted that Davidson had made a distinction between online celebrities and those associated with broadcast media and called him a "gatekeeper" for hypocritically disparaging Paul, a celebrity in his own right, who may have been more famous than Davidson (who had 137,000 followers on Instagram and no presence on Facebook or YouTube) among his 23.6 million subscribers and beyond (The Young Turks, 2021, 7:30).

Social Media Influencers, Discursive Power, and Neoliberalism

Online celebrity must not be underestimated. As nodes among the larger networks of social media platforms and users, influencers should be recognized as having the potential for circulating, reinforcing, and justifying the discourses of power that shape societies and subjects. Critical media scholars Blackman and Walkerdine (2001) have provided a clear explanation of how the discursive operates:

Discourses are not discrete entities that function for certain interests. They are made up of shifting networks of associations, bodies of knowledge, expertise, agencies and problems. Discourses do not merely legitimate and perpetuate particular realities, but constitute ways of thinking and acting—inciting and inducing desire—and subjective commitment to particular ways of acting upon ourselves and others. (p. 117)

Discourses of power serve to construct how people understand the range of aspects of life, such as gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, science, criminality, and economics (Foucault, 1990; Sonu, 2022). With globalization, economic discourses have provided governing logics on a global scale, specifically those that have come to compose what had eventually been termed “neoliberalism.”

Neoliberal rationales and practices flourished after World War II, 1945–1980, as academics, economic planners, and the business classes in Europe and the United States developed a version of the “free market” that pushed deregulation, privatization, and fiscal austerity policies to diminish the role of the public sector in the design and maintenance of societies (Burchell, 1996; Foucault, 1997). That was a shift away from the Keynesian economics of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal (enacted between 1933 and 1939), and the post-war era, during which the state organized markets and invested in social welfare programs to remedy material inequalities. Such policy positions were considered failures that justified new strategies for arranging national and global economies (Burchell, 1996; Rose, 1996). With the deployment of neoliberal policies, people were called on to become increasingly self-reliant and take on the market consequences that were at one time addressed by governments. This process is known as “responsibilization,” in which the privatization of social welfare is situated at the individual level (Rose, 1996).

Imagined by economic thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman, the ethics of what had become neoliberalism were not unconcerned with the human condition and the “common good.” As philosopher Whyte (2019) had established in *The Morals of the Market*, the architects of neoliberalism were invested in a particular vision of how free markets were supposed to operate and believed that embracing market norms and values would lead to material improvements for the individuals and groups who did so. Within that milieu, neoliberal ethics have encouraged people to become “entrepreneurs of the self,” who are autonomous, flexible subjects responsive to the market conditions that impact their everyday lives (Freeman, 2011). The scope of neoliberal subjectification has not been limited to being aware of trends and retraining or investing accordingly, learning how to find new networking opportunities, or developing creative enterprises to strike out on one’s own (Freeman, 2011). Becoming a neoliberal subject has entailed attention to one’s internal life, such as the affective capacities, emotional intelligence, and other personal characteristics that are understood as important in the marketplace, such as resilience and discipline, which are central to entrepreneurialism (Freeman, 2011).

Our affective and emotional capacities have also been important to the privatization of care and solutions to social problems, as in personal and corporate benevolence through philanthropy and volunteerism (McMurria, 2008). Subjectification operates on the cognitive *and* affective planes as we learn how to think about our feelings and feel about our thoughts. In development since the mid-20th century, neoliberal sensibilities, sentimentalities, and practices were placed in competition with emergent arguments concerned with “human rights,” which took a pessimistic view of market values and individualism as foundations for organizing societies (Whyte, 2019). Social media have provided an environment in which users are able to act on themselves and others in the constitution of selves and society, with influencers featured prominently in the process of producing and becoming subjects across the platforms.

The process of neoliberal capitalist subjectification has been theorized as a taken-for-granted phenomenon that functions uniformly across sociocultural contexts. Such an approach brackets out the

particularity of what Brenner and Theodore (2002) have termed "actually existing neoliberalism," which refers to the specific ways in which the neoliberal project is "contextually embedded" in localized political-cultural geographies (pp. 350–351). Citing political scientist Brown (2018), theorists Peck and Theodore (2019) noted that the neoliberal project is not static in form and can be understood as one in which the economy is central to the organization of all social life, including the democratic process. Within the historical context of neoliberalism, Mann has been producing content and building parasocial relationships with his followers/viewers at a moment when neoliberalisms in policy and name/idea are being challenged or outright rejected by reactionary populist-nationalist movements and politicians, such as former U.S. president Donald Trump, with his withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

At the same time, the past and current Democratic leadership, now in the White House, has adhered to what Fraser (2017) has termed "progressive neoliberalism," which is an approach to neoliberal governance that has prioritized liberal identity politics to the exclusion of economic class positions (as in "the working classes") while upholding corporate power and encouraging that society is organized as a capitalist meritocracy. In turn, the bare composition of neoliberal markets in their global and local power and structures have remained intact while life has been becoming increasingly difficult for average people, and the crises of economic and identity-based social relations and politics have intensified (Fraser, 2017; Peck & Theodore, 2019). In the current moment, features such as nativism, racism, misogyny, and partisan and religious sectarianisms have been more greatly pronounced in the political-cultural landscapes. Purposeful or not, Mann's work can serve to soften how the social environment is interpreted, and/or engage in veiled apologetics for neoliberal policies and rationales and obscure their externalities by emphasizing kindness and depoliticizing economic life.

Taking his work at face value, it appears that Mann is affected by what Berlant (2010) has called a "cruel optimism," which is a deep attachment to a given object "in advance of its loss" (p. 94). In response to current social/cultural anxieties and problems, Mann's videos express a continuing faith in the individual's power within the market environment, by constructing fantasy-like scenarios of life under contemporary capitalism, resembling what Glynos and colleagues (2021) have described as "fantasmatic logics," which are rationales that operate to reinforce and justify our attachments to particular discourses, such as those underpinning neoliberal economics. Through the use of fantasy, Mann provides progressive neoliberal moral guidance and parasocial support for ordinary people in the face of global-national economic failure, social-cultural conflict, and rising authoritarianisms that, since the 1990s, neoliberal evangelists such as Friedman (2005) have claimed the world would avoid by encouraging the expansion of free markets.

Dhar Mann: Neoliberal Moral Tales and the "American Dream"

Well before Mann had acquired his 67 million total followers/subscribers, *The New York Times* had deemed him "the moral philosopher of YouTube" due to the popularity of his video "fables" that featured "stock characters learning lessons in a format tailored to the uncanny algorithmic currents of social media" (Marcus, 2021, para. 1). Mann's videos all follow a particular format, starting by introducing a character with a specific problem, such as being a homeless adult, a privileged teenager who needs guidance, or child being bullied on social media. Throughout, previously unknown performers then act out simplistic moral tales aimed at teaching basic life lessons. In that *New York Times* feature, Mann revealed that his videos were intentionally scripted so

that children and non-native English speakers could easily understand the storylines (Marcus, 2021). His personal story is that of an entrepreneur, who, as the son of immigrants, had come from humble beginnings. He decided to make inspirational videos while enduring the challenges of a failed relationship and an unsuccessful cannabis startup that was meant to be the “Wal-Mart of weed” (Marcus, 2021, para. 10). Coming out of that experience, Mann has built a studio with more than 100 staff and actors to produce tales that are about character and morality and often connected to “prosperity” and the ability to consume, which have long been associated with the “American dream” (Mann, 2022a; Stern, 2021).

Mann represents the world he has created as a dream by placing his personal brand into his storylines with a fantasy-like significance (e.g., students in elementary and high schools are all well aware of Dhar Mann, consider him a major celebrity, and buy his merchandise), and his actual private life with his wife and children is depicted as largely idyllic, which portrays him as achieving success in every way (Stern, 2021). His marriage and family life have been chronicled on his channel titled Dhar and Laura (n.d.), which has 1.6 million subscribers. Mann’s content, and, in turn, his personal brand, and the discourses of power they have been produced by and are upholding, are also distributed worldwide in Hindi, Arabic, and Farsi. That is significant, as we know that locally and globally, electronic media act as technologies of governance in the circulation, reinforcement, and justification of neoliberal cultural norms and values through economic discourses of power, which encourage audiences to shape themselves through the dictates of the neoliberal economy (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

Although Mann’s content is hosted on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, he began his career as an influencer on YouTube. His videos resemble short TV programs, and that similarity is not surprising since YouTube as a concept was derived from TV in name and intention. “The tube” is a term that had traditionally been used as a moniker for the TV as a device, and referred to the cathode-ray tube, which was the primary piece of hardware that made mid-20th century TVs function. Furthermore, creators have “channels” rather than “accounts” or “profiles,” which brings to mind the TV format. By using the platform, “you” could have your own “channel” on “the tube” and broadcast to wide audiences. Through YouTube, the production of TV or TV-adjacent content has been decentralized. However, power relations have not been fully flattened since some individuals and groups, such as Mann and YouTube influencers with high numbers of subscribers and views, have radiated more strongly than other nodes in the network.

The cultural and social power of TV has been theorized as representational in its “normalized” depictions of everyday life in an array of settings and as an intervention that mediates self-performance (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Neoliberal modeling has been embedded into the representations and standardized narratives of fictional, fully scripted sitcoms, and included in the presentation of the world in the documentary-like style of semi-scripted reality TV (RTV) shows (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Stratton, 2016). Mann’s videos resemble scripted TV programs as he has used techniques that adhered to and/or straddled practices from comedic sitcom and dramatic TV formats. These include basic scripting revolving around family, friends, and community relationships, the use of humor or light melodrama to teach basic lessons to audiences (as in the cases of “very special episodes”), and low-quality acting. At the same time, he has also produced videos that include elements of RTV (Marcus, 2021). He has done that by inviting well-known influencers and “real people” who had gone “viral” on social media for their stories to act in his content. In one episode, Lizzy Howell, who had become famous on Instagram for being a talented ballerina with a

nonnormative body type, portrayed a young woman who was experiencing the same problems with discrimination and bullying that she had in her actual life (Bennett, 2021; Mann, 2021c).

By having influencers in his videos and taking a narrator's role in them, Mann's scripted fantasy content further overlapped with reality. Those stylistic aspects of Mann's videos, combined with the actors' amateurish chops and lack of recognizability, conjured an appearance that "ordinary people" were potentially recreating real events, or those that could be real, akin to TruTV's RTV programming, which was notoriously heavily scripted and resembled mockumentaries more than actual RTV shows (Lowry, 2012). Mann's work should be understood as being produced within the context of the "actually existing neoliberalisms" that have constructed the political economy of the United States and caused the "American dream" to be increasingly difficult to attain. Already suffering from decades of stagnant wages due to the deindustrialization of the United States and the fallout of the Great Recession, the recent rising costs of basic cost-of-living needs, such as housing, food, and medical care, have undercut any pay gains workers may have enjoyed in the pandemic-era economic recovery (DeSilver, 2018; Horsley, 2022).

Compounding those matters, the current political-cultural environment of the United States, signified by the former president, Donald J. Trump, has been afflicted by racial tensions, opposition to the rights and visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other nonnormative sexual identities, attempts to normalize sexism, and anxieties regarding immigration. At the same time, business-oriented initiatives, such as deregulation, privatization, and the regressive redistribution of wealth associated with neoliberal policies, had continued to be the dominant approach to managing the economy (Peck & Theodore, 2019). Market dominance had guided the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to disastrous capitalist and necropolitical-economic turns (Bratich, 2022). Companies concentrated on profiting from the lockdowns, and governments attempted to manage the economy by limiting assistance to individuals and families to nudge employees back to work and keep the engines of capital running. Meanwhile, many ordinary people in the service and transportation sectors were subjected to abuse by those who opposed the lockdowns and did not want to abide by mask and/or vaccine guidelines, placing workers at risk of illness, subsequently lost wages, or death. Mann's fantasy televisual-style representations of this world were intended to help audiences cope with such conditions and the related social problems that are sure to be present in the United States as the country emerges from the COVID-19 crisis and moves into the mid-20th century.

"Telling Stories" and "Changing Lives": Analyzing Dhar Mann's Videos

Since May 2018, Mann has uploaded 772 videos to YouTube (as of early January 2023). For this analysis, I viewed 77 on YouTube (and one unique to Facebook), spanning from the earliest posted, up through the most recent. Mann's narratives are very wholesome and encourage kindness, empathy, and sympathy in one's relationships, no matter how fleeting, and irrespective of the social standing of those involved. At the same time, the episodes contained themes prescribing hard work, entrepreneurialism, and individualistic moral practices (such as being charitable) as the paths to happiness, economic stability, and even opulent wealth. Importantly, such videos have shown audiences what it means to be a "good" member of a society governed by capitalist economic forces that have produced dire consequences over time. Under contemporary actually existing neoliberal sociocultural conditions in the "post-pandemic" United States,

many are coping with job insecurity, an unstable/expensive housing market, and wealth inequality, all of which determine how money, goods, and services are distributed, who works for whom, and what those arrangements mean to the conditions we labor under, our quality of life, and the types of relationships we have within our families, friendships, and workplaces.

On the purpose of his videos, Mann has been adamant about his investment in society through his work, coining the Dhar Mann Studios motto of "we're not just telling stories, we're changing lives" (Mann, 2018). The lessons in Mann's videos have spanned a range of subjects that would appeal to a broad set of audiences and teach basic morality, having brought viewers stories about fundamental ethical problems pertaining to dishonesty, selfishness, and respect for the personal property of others. Although people of all ages could understand such themes, those topics are more relatable to adults or those closer to adulthood, as they involve working, driving, and theft at the ordinary level of taking small items from the store or failing to pay a restaurant check. Mann has also created videos that would attract younger audiences that highlighted popular influencers, addressed issues of sibling rivalry, and provided cautionary tales about the pitfalls of seeking attention online. Those themes were repeated in other videos using different actors and tweaking the details. Mann had even tackled COVID-19 politics as they had appeared in the United States, with narratives asking viewers to resist selfishly hoarding supplies and avoid needlessly being in public places during the "lockdowns" to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Among Mann's body of work are stories that directly involve personal and social relationships within typified contemporary economic conditions in the United States. Issues such as homelessness and the struggles of working and impoverished people are found in episodes such as "Chef Kicks Out Homeless Customer, What Happens Next Will Shock You" (Mann, 2021a), "Cashier SHAMES Poor Mom on Food Stamps, What Happens Next Is Shocking" (Mann, 2021d), "Homeless Mom Collects Cans for Cash, Stranger Changes Her Life Forever" (Mann, 2021b), and "Homeless Man Finds a Woman's Wedding Ring, Ending Is Shocking" (Mann, 2020a). All those videos challenged classism and greed while presenting private, personal, individualistic solutions to serious problems in society. "Chef Kicks Out Homeless Customer" (Mann, 2021a) portrays an egotistical restaurateur, Giovanni, who does not pay or appreciate his staff and is obsessed with his recent prestigious "Kitchelin Star" award (a play on the famed Michelin Star). The award is eventually revoked after he treats a "homeless" guest poorly, who was actually a representative of the "Kitchelin Star Group" and performing an undercover review. "Don't judge a book by its cover" was the overall message, which was framed as an act that can have dire consequences for those who prejudge others based on their physical appearance.

Mann's choice to set the story in a restaurant is significant, as with the deindustrialization of the United States that has come with neoliberal policies, factory jobs had been replaced by those in the service sector (Olney & Pacitti, 2017; Scott, 2003). Critiques of the restaurant industry were leveled within the story's narrative, speaking to the conditions that had led to what analysts have called "The Great Resignation" (Radin, 2022). In one instance, while bragging about the Kitchelin Star award, Giovanni is interrupted by one of the chefs who asked what benefit there was to winning it as he and the other staff members were paid a low wage either way. Giovanni responded by reinforcing that he was the owner and that the chef should be grateful to have a job. That scene was a dramatized depiction of the business relationships that spurred the exodus of workers from kitchens in the United States during the COVID-19

crisis, which led to people leaving jobs in the service sector for better pay and working environments (Hoff, 2021; Radin, 2022). Viewers learn that as a business owner in the contemporary economy, Giovanni's superiority complex and greed left him vulnerable to mistreating others, including the inspector, which ultimately led to his downfall.

What was not portrayed were the varied ways in which the workers in Giovanni's restaurant could have addressed their grievances, such as organizing a union to represent their interests as working-class people, in relation to his, as "the boss." We can also see how Mann constructs a fantasy scenario in which the free-market system of ownership and labor is not to be indicted, and those who are to be rewarded or punished will get what they ultimately deserve, depending on their behavior, which includes how hard they work. Such a logic asserts that it is employers like Giovanni who disrupt the harmony that could be established between business owners and their employees rather than an inherent power differential baked into a neoliberal system of "at-will" employment (a legal term for policies that allow employees to be terminated at any time), "gig economy" positions, and lean, fluctuating scheduling that ensures workforces are "flexible." From the narrative in the video, audiences are to assume that if the kitchen and floor staff had been working as hard as possible for a "good leader," the outcomes would have been fair and positive for all.

Mann's videos have also used fantasy to demonstrate how we should understand solutions to issues such as homelessness and food insecurity. Episodes such as "Cashier SHAMES Poor Mom on Food Stamps" (Mann, 2021d), "Homeless Mom Collects Cans for Cash" (Mann, 2021b), and "Homeless Man Finds a Woman's Wedding Ring" (Mann, 2020a) all encouraged individualized approaches to ensuring people's general welfare. In each story, the main protagonists were all helped by others who recognized their good character and efforts. For instance, in "Cashier SHAMES Poor Mom on Food Stamps" (Mann, 2021d), a mother on government assistance (who reads as White or Latina) was accosted by an employee (a young, White woman who fits traditional beauty standards) at a local store after trying to buy items that were not covered by the program. Meanwhile, a "homeless man" (who is older and White) intervened by offering to pay for the excluded items with change he made panhandling. By chance, the mother's ex-business landlord (a Black woman) witnessed the interaction and offered to help the mother by becoming her business partner. This entailed investing all of the startup capital necessary to reestablish the restaurant that the mother and her husband owned before he died in a car accident. A montage of hard work and resultant success followed, with a voiceover by Mann reinforcing how help from others, combined with a good attitude and persistence, will produce economic stability and satisfaction with one's life.

The story concluded with the mother and her now-business partner witnessing the cashier in the midst of accosting another person for using a benefits card. The former two informed the employee in front of the customer that they were the new owners and that she was fired. Taking the story to another level of progressive neoliberal fantasy, the homeless man appeared in a suit and tie and declared that he was now the "head of operations" and "store manager." With little explanation, there was an implication that it was his good deeds that led to his new life. There was a happy ending for the mother, daughter, and homeless man, and the cashier got her comeuppance. Yet, looking more closely, the story and lesson were communicated from the perspective of neoliberal capitalism. In the episode, the Electric Benefits Transfer (EBT) card was helpful, and the cashier's shaming of those using social services was portrayed as the actions of someone with poor character. However, the availability of public assistance was not framed as significant

to the mother and daughter's journey out of poverty, which, in the end, rested on the private support and generosity of her former landlord, an unlikely hero, and their own hard work, grit, and flexibility.

Similarly, in "Homeless Mom Collects Cans for Cash" (Mann, 2021b) and "Homeless Man Finds a Woman's Wedding Ring" (Mann, 2020a), there were good-hearted people who extended a "hand up" to those they knew who were living on the streets. In the former, the same performers as in "Cashier SHAMES Poor Mom on Food Stamps" (Mann, 2021d) played a mother and daughter who were recycling cans and bottles to survive and had coincidentally bumped into an old family friend (an upper-middle-class, blonde, White woman) at a city park garbage can. The friend, shocked at the life the mother and daughter were living, offered to open her home to them until they could get back on their feet, which, in the context of the video, personalized the care of people in need. In the "Homeless Man Finds . . ." video, a woman (who is young and Black) had lost her very expensive wedding ring when it slipped off her finger while giving money to a homeless man (also in "Cashier SHAMES Poor Mom on Food Stamps") and into his change cup without either of them knowing. After realizing that he had the ring and having an inkling of where the person it likely belonged to was employed, he wrestled with his conscience and resisted the temptation to sell it and keep the money. The homeless man decided to seek out the ring's owner and eventually found her. On his doing so, the woman started a GoFundMe page that generated nearly \$250,000 in donations.

At the end of the video, she is shown talking to the homeless man in an alley and giving him a duffel bag stuffed with money, which he accepts in disbelief. Due to the neoliberal gutting of federal, state, and local social safety nets, setting up GoFundMe pages to cope with catastrophic medical debt, job losses, or other personal tragedies has become commonplace (Abramovitz, 2014; Berliner & Kenworthy, 2017). Such measures have kept some individuals and families from becoming destitute; however, most campaigns have failed to reach their goals (Berliner & Kenworthy, 2017). With that fact, Mann's fantasy narrative upholds the "lottery winner" myth, combining it with judgments about the "deserving poor" (those who "deserve" to receive assistance vs. those who do not) while locating care for individual and social welfare exclusively within private spheres, which are all entrenched cultural features of the contemporary political-economic environment of the United States.

As one of Mann's core audiences, young people were also featured as central characters in his videos. In storylines involving adolescents and children, they were depicted interacting with their peers, family members, and those who worked in the service sector. Just as in the episodes centered on adults, there is an emphasis on social relations and power as governed by the economy, particularly in terms of the interpersonal bonds that bind together families, communities, and the greater societies within which they exist. Young people were shown occupying different class positions in relation to one another and others in their lives. In each story, the initial antagonists become protagonists as they atone for how they treated those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder and work toward cultivating "good character" by becoming more compassionate and charitable. For instance, in "Rich Kid Humiliates Pool Boy, What Happens Next Is Shocking" (Mann, 2021f), a privileged teenager, the "rich kid," is shown lounging by the pool at his opulent family mansion and ordering his similarly aged "pool boy" to put up the family Christmas lights, which his mother had originally asked *him* to do. Angry at the "rich kid's" laziness, his mother forced him to get a job, which led him to appreciate the "pool boy's" efforts and his own good fortune. Knowing that the "pool boy" was working to save for an expensive video-

game console, the "rich kid" decided to show up at the "pool boy's" small apartment and give the latter his console, which was intended to be the "rich kid's" Christmas present.

At first glance, this episode appears to carry little meaning beyond teaching young people to be grateful for what they have and generous to those who are less fortunate. However, in the story, the economic relationship between the two boys is "natural" and "normal," with neither questioning their class positions and resultant power relations. Furthermore, Mann's casting of a Black performer as the "rich kid" and a White performer as the "pool boy" smacks of post-racial progressive neoliberalism, in which race is not seen as a significant factor in the production of class hierarchies. This is inherently a double-edged sword as on one side, Mann's casting is anti-racist, but on the other, it reinforces an idea that anyone can find success in the capitalist system, regardless of the statistics on structural impediments affecting populations by race, if only "they" choose to work hard enough.

Audiences, Critiques, and Connections

Mann's morality plays have reached massive audiences who have watched his videos more than 30 billion times (Mann, 2022b). Audiences find particular uses and gratifications within social media content and their connections with others online, directly, or otherwise (Humphreys, 2015). Types of uses and gratifications can span a wide range, and YouTube provides a platform that can be easily accessed by audiences to view videos and leave comments. Mann is very popular and well-liked. There are many viewers and/or subscribers who are fans and may consider themselves a part of the "Dhar Mann Fam," which is the name he has given to the community he sees himself building across the platforms where he posts his videos (Mann, 2018). Mann is also well aware that there are those who find the acting and storylines in his videos to be of low quality and simplistic and has even responded to those audiences in different episodes, such as one titled "10-Year-Old Makes Fun of Dhar Mann, He Lives to Regret It" (Mann, 2021e). That self-effacing style has allowed him to use humor to publicly recognize how viewers have perceived and made fun of him and his videos and convert the jabs delivered in comment sections or by other YouTubers into opportunities to teach more lessons, which is consistent with his public persona, and in turn, the Dhar Mann Studios brand.

One critic of Mann's stories and acting is fellow YouTuber Adanna (2021), whose channel name is courtreezy. She made a "reaction video" about the episode titled "Mom Accuses Son's Black Friend of Stealing, Instantly Regrets It" (Mann, 2020b), in which she poked fun at Mann's over-the-top and cringe-inducing style of addressing racism. In the video, the White "mom" threw her son's Black friend out of her house for using "too much milk" while he and her son were eating cereal. Adanna (2021) argued that the video was superficial, as the mother only learned her lesson after the "Black friend" bought her son an expensive laptop that he needed for school, which demonstrated that the "Black friend" was generous, but more importantly, from a higher class-position than she had previously assumed. In regard to uses and gratifications, Adanna (2021) used Mann's content to produce her own and was seemingly entertained by the ridiculous plot points of the video, such as when the mother became enraged over how much milk was used when her son had offered his friend a bite to eat. That kind of engagement with Mann's content can be understood as coming from the vantage point of the "ironic," self-conscious viewer, who knowingly finds pleasure in watching his "bad" or "cheesy" narratives (Douglas, 2013). Performing professional assessments, Dr. Mikhail "Mike" Varshavski DO, aka, "Doctor Mike" (2021), and lawyer "Legal Eagle" (2021) have also used Mann's videos for reaction content. By gauging the

"realism" of legal and medical matters in different story lines, both had the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and cultivate their respective audiences.

There were also critiques of Mann's content by ordinary users, who were specifically focused on his calls for sympathy and charity. For example, a YouTube user named 4doorsEvenMoreWhores (2021) argued in the comment thread under "Cashier SHAMES Poor Mom on Food Stamps" (Mann, 2021d), that people on state assistance "should be shamed" for not being completely self-sufficient. Another user, Austin (2021), declared that people using EBT cards were "lazy." @savaala8428 (2022) took a softer tone, indirectly defending the cashier by arguing that "the reason why using welfare is considered bad is cause [sic] the truth is many people on welfare do have babies to get more benefits, and do voluntarily decide to not work to freeloader off peoples tax dollars," which leans into stereotypes depicting those among the lower economic classes, and ethnic and racially minoritized people, as dishonest and abusive of the public system. Such expressions reflected how Mann's comment sections were sites for reactionary users to reproduce classism, and transgressive actors to affect others through their purposeful cruelty and negativity, potentially getting satisfaction from how their behaviors were received or how they may have imagined them to have been. The commenters' opposition to Mann's story ignored how, in keeping with neoliberal-capitalist rationales, it downplayed public assistance, and their ire only appeared to be in response to the compassionate, "progressive" tenor of the video.

Regardless of the presence of a few right-wing ideologues and trolls within the threads connected to that particular video, there were countless comments from people who appreciated Mann's message, including those who have experienced hardships similar to those that were represented on their screens. Illuminating the emotional power of Mann's videos, Torres (2022) responded to "Cashier SHAMES Poor Mom" (Mann, 2021d) with public confessions and praise, typing, "I just can't stop crying. Dhar Mann God Bless you for all you do." Further down, Night_Walker (2022) wrote, "I smiled so hard when I saw the homeless man in that suit, it gave me hope of the change that could happen in this world." Such replies indicated that Mann's fantasy spoke to their desire for a better world and these were among many others that had praised his videos, complimented the "homeless man" for his generosity and courage to intervene, and condemned the cashier for her cruelty. Despite the occasional user calling the video "cringey," or making fun of a performer's appearance, the comment sections connected to the videos titled "Homeless Mom Collects Cans for Cash" (Mann, 2021b) and "Homeless Man Finds Wedding Ring" (Mann, 2020a) were similar to those for "Cashier SHAMES Poor Mom" (Mann, 2021d). In their respective threads, the overwhelming number of responses were testimonials of personal experiences with homelessness, articulations of support for Mann's project, anger at the characters who were rude to those down on their luck, and frustration over the perceptions and treatment of the impoverished in real life.

Light melodrama was important to the construction of Mann's fantasy scenarios, and in the comment sections of all the videos I had watched, there were hundreds of users who had responded emotionally. They had been affected by Mann's stories. Just as Ramon Torres had, many others revealed that while watching his videos, they too had cried, or were on the verge of doing so. Those reactions to the melodramatic forged connections between viewers and Mann's characters within the conjunctures of sociocultural-material representations and reality (Abu-Lughod, 2005). This directed the attention of social media users toward the struggles and generousities of individuals, and away from collective solutions to the

issues plaguing U.S. society, which leaves those who own and run it, such as the elite political parties and corporate classes, to their own devices with little public oversight. Between Mann's own productive capacities and those of the various audiences that engage with and circulate his videos, Mann's brand and narratives have been constituted polyvocally, resulting in a range of interpretations. However, Mann's messages of kindness, selflessness, and the virtue of good character are ultimately rooted in powerful capitalist socioeconomic discourses. With his talent for delivering captivating, widely relatable narratives, and the continuing growth of Dhar Mann Studios into a larger operation, his content will certainly flourish in both its sophistication and reach in the discursive composition and (re)presentation of 21st-century life within contemporary American cultural contexts.

Conclusion: Neoliberal Fantasies and American Dreams

Los Angeles "megainfluencer" Dhar Mann has become known for producing video content intended to encourage kindness, generosity, and creating a better society. However, what has been less apparent is how his efforts have upheld the ethics of neoliberalism. Given the subsumption of cultural life by capitalism, it is crucial to acknowledge neoliberalism's discursive presence in influencer culture and the power that megainfluencers have within the para-social relationships we have with them that informs our everyday lives. Mann operates in a genre that provides rich examples for us to analyze and better understand how neoliberal capitalism has become a deep-seated ethical and moral framework that all of us are expected to embrace and fold into every aspect of society, locally and globally.

Mann's narratives on matters of economic inequality, homelessness, workplace agency, and access to a social safety net explored in this article have centered on adults and young people being placed in fantasy scenarios in which private acts of kindness, charity, and selflessness, combined with hard work, were the preferred means to addressing society's problems and achieving success in their careers and personal lives. Such an outlook ignores and obscures the realities of life in the United States under neoliberal capitalism and glosses over how that system and resultant power relations have been rejected by many in the contemporary moment. Instead, Mann has favored optimistic representations and "progressive" discourses that reflect and uphold his and society's attachments to capitalism, in which he homes in on humanitarian ethics while promoting individualism and entrepreneurialism among his audiences.

Within the context of "actually existing neoliberalism," which includes its failures and rejection, Mann's work can be read as employing fantasmatic logics in a state of cruel optimism to apologize for capitalism and help viewers cope with and rationalize everyday living conditions and interactions. By analyzing the videos and social media presence of Mann and similar influencers, such as Varun Pruthi, media scholars and audiences can recognize the subtle and nuanced presence of neoliberal capitalism reproduced on the platforms that compose our communicative infrastructure. Given the centrality of social media influencers to the global and local production of cultural norms and values, we must understand their involvement in the discursive constitution of morality within the material-ethical frameworks of the contemporary capitalist economy as daily life becomes increasingly difficult for growing numbers of people in the United States and around the world.

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