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(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work

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Entrepreneurial Wishes and Career Dreams

In spring 2014, close on the heels of toy manufacturer Mattel's controversial collaboration with *Sports Illustrated*—which featured a bathing suit-clad Barbie on the magazine's 50th Anniversary Swim-suit Issue cover-wrap—the company unveiled the latest doll in its “I Can Be” career collection: Entrepreneur Barbie. Outfitted in a modern-cut magenta dress and furnished with a diminutive tablet device and smart phone, Entrepreneur Barbie was marketed as a self-starter “ready to make a bold business move and strike out on her own to achieve her career dreams.”¹ The company tapped ten prominent female entrepreneurs, including Girls Who Code founding CEO Reshma Saujani and Jennifer Fleiss, co-founder of Rent the Runway, as real-world ambassadors for Barbie's “Career of the Year.” Social media figured prominently in the product launch: the hashtag “unapologetic”—originally created for the *Sports Illustrated* campaign—was repackaged as a message of female empowerment, and Barbie took to Twitter to host a virtual “Pink Power Lunch,” wherein she engaged fans in 140-character dialogues about their “dream careers.”²

Although a few public commentators lapped up Mattel's celebratory rhetoric of women's liberation, reporters and cultural critics alike mocked the company's naïve depiction of female entrepreneurship. An *Atlantic* reporter, who nodded toward Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg with the headline “Barbie Leans In,” blasted the doll's

enduring penchant for pink and fetishization of unrealistic standards of female physicality.³ *Time* reporter Jessica Roy's criticism went beyond body image censure to highlight the tension between a romanticized version of entrepreneurship and persistent gender inequalities in tech start-ups. As Roy scoffed, "Perhaps next Mattel can craft 'Silently Enduring Sexual Harassment with the Hope I Will Get a Raise' Barbie; 'Making Less Than My Male Counterparts' Barbie; 'Getting Turned Down by Investors Because I'm Pregnant' Barbie; or 'I'm Going to Die Eating This Sad Salad at My Desk Alone' Barbie."⁴ While debates about the merits of Entrepreneur Barbie seemed to languish by the time the doll hit toy store shelves, muted in part by news of Mattel's precipitously declining revenues, the reactions reflect more widespread discourses of gender and self-enterprise in the aptly named "new economy."

More than ever, contemporary culture's benchmark of success is the figure of the entrepreneur; a study of young people's career aspirations revealed that roughly two-thirds of those aged eighteen to thirty-four desire to start their own business, and 37 percent want to work independently.⁵ The ideal of the enterprising self feeds into and is fed by a torrent of career manuals, online articles, digital tutorials, and even college courses hyping the spirit of passion-fueled careerism. How-to books—such as *Lifestyle Entrepreneur: Live Your Dreams, Ignite Your Passions and Run Your Business from Anywhere in the World*; *The \$100 Startup: Reinvent the Way You Make a Living, Do What You Love, and Create a New Future*; and the latest installment in John Parkin's irreverently titled series, *F**k It: Do What You Love*—provide tried and true steps for securing a career where pleasure and profit blend in perfect harmony. The affective language of "love" and "passion" is so prevalent in these employment discourses that scholar and *Jacobin* contributor Miya Tokumitsu declared "Do What You Love" the "unofficial work mantra of our time."⁶

Nowhere is this career mantra more pervasive than in the creative industries, including fashion, media, entertainment, and design. These fields are seen as idyllic professional destinations, characterized by autonomy, flexibility, and, above all, the potential for self-actualization. For young women, including those incited by what cultural theorist Angela McRobbie identifies as the “creativity *dispositif*” rampant in popular culture and the education system, “work becomes akin to a romantic relationship.”⁷ Yet the boundaries surrounding these industries are notoriously impermeable, especially in a “gig economy” of outsourced jobs and slashed benefits.

With other viable pathways blocked, would-be creatives are turning to social media as conduits to visibility and exposure. Silicon Valley social networks are the new audition reels for the media and culture industries—the place where stars are made, and (the hope is) paid. YouTube is frequently touted as a platform for budding musicians and comedians, and Instagram is celebrated as a public forum for modeling hopefuls.⁸ Even Snapchat—with its ephemeral stories and animated face-mapping filters—has spawned a new breed of star: pithy virtual storytellers with word-of-mouth cachet.⁹ The triumphant tales of the online “discovered” offer a modern-day version of screen legend Lana Turner’s fabled encounter at the soda fountain. And though these celeb-bloggers and digital influencers are allegedly disrupting “the fame paradigm,” they are upheld in the popular imagination as individuals *just like us*.¹⁰

This narrative of digital democratization is especially pronounced in the world of fashion, one of the industries I closely examine in the book. Since the mid-aughts, personal style blogs have been lauded for upending traditional hierarchies of high fashion influence and taste-making.¹¹ The notion that *anyone can be a fashion blogger* is an unshakable myth in popular culture, and media outlets routinely profile style

influencers who lie at the margins of elite fashion's mainstream: plus-size bloggers, bloggers aged forty-plus (or alternatively those still in middle school), and hijab bloggers, as well as the more nebulous designation of "alternative fashion bloggers." The attention lavished on these and other über-stylish digital content producers is astonishing; I witnessed firsthand the frenzy that accompanies A-list fashion bloggers like Aimee Song (Song of Style) and Chiara Ferragni (The Blonde Salad) as they sashayed their way through the swarms at New York Fashion Week, preening for the cameras or snapping selfies with eager onlookers (see Figure 1). Mainstream media coverage also spotlights the economic valuation of these so-called "influencers," revealing "how style bloggers are turning social savvy into six-figure salaries" or reporting on those "paid up to \$15,000 for a single Instagram post."¹²

Importantly, the high-profile activities of super-bloggers and the Insta-famous obscure the contributions of legions of other social media producers—bloggers, vloggers, DIY stylists, and more—who make nary a headline. This is a book about these enterprising, digitally networked young people and the oft-unpaid work they undertake. After all, it is the experiences of individuals *aspiring* to colonize the social media economy that give expression to what I call "aspirational labor."

Aspirational labor is a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love*. As both a practice and a worker ideology, aspirational labor shifts content creators' focus from the present to the future, dangling the prospect of a career where labor and leisure coexist. Indeed, aspirational laborers expect that they will *one day* be compensated for their productivity—be it through material rewards



1. Chiara Ferragni, the creator of the blog *The Blonde Salad*, poses for a photographer outside the Michael Kors show at New York Fashion Week.

Photo Credit: Brent Luvaas.

or social capital. But in the meantime, they remain suspended in the consumption and promotion of branded commodities.

Discourses of “paying off” are central to the motivations of aspirational laborers; they expect that their investments of time, energy, and capital will yield a fulfilling, and perhaps lucrative, career. Of course, as I detail throughout this book, “paying off” is highly subjective and varies according to the interests, experiences, and ambitions of the aspirant. Some young women I interviewed seek a career in the creative industries; thus, “paying off” would mean landing a full-time position at a women’s magazine, fashion house, or social media firm. Others, particularly those swept up in the infectious rhetoric of entrepreneurialism, see a high-paying blog or makeup vlog as the endgame, with income from affiliate links, brand sponsorships, and/or designer collaborations. For these individuals, the possibility of being independently employed is especially rousing.

But despite the optimism surrounding the future rewards of aspirational labor, only a fraction of content creators rises above the din to achieve major success. For the rest, the ideal of *getting paid to do what you love* remains an unfulfilled promise.

Drawing upon more than fifty in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a close analysis of professionalization resources, this book highlights a set of patterned contradictions that are essential to social media producers’ own self-descriptions:

Authenticity vs. self-promotion: A pervasive social media aesthetic and narrative relies on the contemporary logics of “authenticity” and “realness” but requires laborers to draw upon market logics to brand themselves.

Creativity vs. commerce: The ideal of creative self-expression that they circulate serves to distinguish social media aspirants from

those working in cultural industries more explicitly driven by profit maximization. Yet much like the latter, individual social media producers confront commercial pressures on the path to generate income.

Hobby vs. professional status: The contrast between professional and amateur pervades the world of social media makers. Certainly, this dichotomy elides the reality that those (seemingly hobby) bloggers with the greatest number of followers have been able to parlay their digital fame into book deals, clothing lines, and designer collaborations, among others.

My use of the term *aspirational* highlights the incentive of future reward systems for present-day productive activities. This concept has important historical precedents that I trace throughout the book. In particular, I detail a significant cultural shift from *aspirational consumption*—status-induced consumerism that routes self-expression through the marketplace—to *aspirational labor*, where self-expression is articulated through a patterned set of highly individualized, value-generating productive activities.

The reference to social media activity as *labor* may initially seem puzzling, given that individuals seem to take great pleasure in their online activities. While the division between labor and leisure has always been knotty, particularly for women,¹³ the ascent of digital media renders this divide doubly problematic given the myriad ways in which commonplace acts of self-expression—“liking” a brand’s Instagram post, reviewing the latest gadget on Amazon, or updating one’s social media profile—generate value for media and marketing institutions.¹⁴ This conceptual slipperiness is among the reasons so many scholars have sought to delineate the borders around “free labor” in the digital economy; in the oft-quoted words of Italian scholar

Tiziana Terranova, such labor is “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited.”¹⁵ My own use of the term *labor* captures the productive, purposeful, task-oriented, and value-generating function of these activities. Moreover, as this book makes clear, these practices are quite similar to the (waged) work of traditional media producers, including journalists, video producers, advertisers, and publicists. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argued of the YouTube community, social media networks must be understood as “co-creative” spaces where “amateur and professional media content, identities and motivations are not so easily separated.”¹⁶

Social and industrial constructions of gender and femininity are central to the aspirational labor system, especially in the creative industries; for this reason, most of the social media producers I interviewed were women. This is not to say that men don’t engage in aspirational labor; they do. But the genres of social media production examined in this book—fashion and lifestyle blogging, beauty vlogging, DIY design—are largely populated by young women. In the popular imagination, these activities are framed through crude binaries that tend to structure conversations about gender-coded internet usage and creative expression. For instance, despite early accounts of the “masculine” blogosphere, the rapid ascension of social media has been celebrated as evidence of the internet’s progressive “feminization.”¹⁷ In 2012, the Nielsen company released data that revealed a stark “gender divide” in social media habits; noteworthy among its findings was that women—especially in the eighteen to twenty-four category—were significantly more likely than men to have a blog, build social media profiles, and follow a brand online. The *Atlantic*’s Megan Garber summarized the data with a cheering assertion: “Girls may not run the world, but they dominate on the web.”¹⁸ But many of these activities are inscribed within a ubiquitous consumer landscape.

As media scholars Sarah Banet-Weiser and Inna Arzumanova argue to this end, “The idea of girls using the web more than boys . . . is already bound by conventional notions of what, and who, girls *are*—fashionistas, make-up artists, stylists, and most of all—shoppers.”¹⁹ Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova situate gendered social media praxis (they focus on shopping hauls posted on YouTube) in a historical context wherein girls and young women are seen above all as *consumers* who engage in work on the self (brand).²⁰

Aspirational labor, too, relies on historically constructed notions of femininity—particularly discourses of community, affect, and commodity-based self-expression. As I show in the book, the post-feminist logics of visibility and individual expression are articulated as paths to financial empowerment. In addition, I contend that the labor of aspiration has conceptual similarities to traditional forms of “women’s work” (domestic labor, reproductive labor, care labor), which have remained invisible despite their central role in servicing the engines of capitalism.²¹ I thus situate aspirational labor in a cultural history of unpaid female labor with lineages traceable to systems of patriarchy and commodity capitalism.

Whether male or female, aspirational laborers are engaged in gendered practices that combine (and subsequently reproduce) both of these legacies: working, for little or no pay, to generate consumption-oriented visibility through social media/blogs. This core, gendered dimension of aspirational labor distinguishes the concept from other forms of labor that rely on the temporal deferment of wages and the normalization of risk, most notably Gina Neff’s theory of “venture labor” and Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas F. Corrigan’s notion of “hope labor.”²² Though these differ in important ways, they collectively address the ideologies that rationalize neoliberal workers’ investments of time, capital, and labor through the promise of *eventual* capital or

future success. The ideology of hope labor, Kuehn and Corrigan argue, is “positioned as a meritocratic investment in one’s employment prospects” at a moment when work is evermore precarious and insecure.²³ One way to understand aspirational labor is as a particular form of hope labor, one that foregrounds participation in the consumer circuit as part of a recursive process. In addition to investing in various commodities, the work of aspirational laborers is often physically embodied in the blogger, vlogger, or Instagrammer as she models her newly purchased wares. In a reprise of the female body’s visibility in twentieth-century consumer culture, the digitally networked, pixelated version not only shops but also “tags,” “likes,” and—most importantly—“recommends” branded goods.

The gendered social media activities I track in the book are one facet of a cultural economy marked by widespread independence. Indeed, freelancers, contract hires, and interns constitute a swelling class of workers in a “gig economy,” an “on-demand economy,” or perhaps least euphemistically, a “1099 economy.” Though many of these individuals pursue the much-hyped ideals of flexibility and autonomy, the rapid growth of independent employment is symptomatic of what scholars and labor advocates understand as a “political economy of insecurity.”²⁴ That is, as neoliberal ideologies and practices shift organizational risks and responsibilities onto individual citizens, workers must shoulder the burden for training, healthcare, and other benefits.

Against the backdrop of pervasive worker insecurity, it is perhaps not surprising that career-seekers are urged to identify their distinctive strengths, engage in brazen self-promotion, and spearhead “personal visibility” campaigns.²⁵ That is, they are to internalize the logic of personal branding. Though self-promotion is by no means a new imperative, in recent decades, structural transformations bound to

the neoliberal ideologies of individuality and self-governance have instigated more self-conscious efforts to *brand the self*.²⁶ Increasingly, many of these practices take place across a raft of social media networks: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Forms of online self-branding are built into social network architectures—such as features that require users to add photos to their LinkedIn profiles or craft pithy self-descriptors to fill their Twitter bios. Other efforts to bolster one’s image include practices of “micro-celebrity,” which involve the calculated use of social media to “‘amp up’ [one’s] popularity” and “gain status and attention online.”²⁷ These and other practices command investments in time and energy: building and maintaining one’s social networks; curating one’s feeds with a digital cocktail of informative, thought-provoking, and witty content; and ensuring the consistency of one’s self-brand across the sprawling digital ecosystem.

This book highlights the urgency of these self-promotional activities in an age of social media that hails so many of us as entrepreneurial free agents. The ideology of aspirational labor emerges amidst widespread uncertainty about the future of work and alongside technologies that promise creative fulfillment. And it’s a *seductive* ideology that pairs passion with (worker) profit to glamorize labor conditions that are far less remunerative and gratifying than hyped. Aspirational labor thus romanticizes work as its conditions are becoming more precarious, time-intensive, and decidedly unromantic.