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Specters of the Influencer Ecosystem:

Labor and/as Infrastructure on and beyond Digital Platforms

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Film and TV

by

Zizi Li

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Specters of the Influencer Ecosystem:

Labor and/as Infrastructure on and beyond Digital Platforms

by

Zizi Li

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Steven Franklin Anderson, Chair

Social media influencers are key drivers in today's complex culture of consuming media, goods, and identities. The majority of research on influencers has focused on individual creators, with extremely limited attention on the broader context of social media industries and the workers who support it. I argue that our current understanding of influencer work has displaced our ability to recognize the full spectrum of labor that goes into the industrial workflow of influencer media production. My research elucidates how the influencer ecosystem mobilizes racial, gendered, and classed labor from both its media and commodity supply chains. This ecosystem contains the entangled operations of waged and non-waged labor extraction from the chains of precarious workers in influencer media production, home management, e-commerce marketing, and retail logistics. By looking at an expanded notion of influencer industrial and infrastructural labor, this project rethinks labor value, forms and circuits of labor, and sites of production in

digital culture as they relate to race, gender, sexuality, and class. This research further employs the concept of spectrality to reconsider how we engage with ubiquitous influencer media and confronts the social and cultural forces that made some labor spectral and certain laboring bodies into spectacle. In doing so, this dissertation accomplishes three goals: 1) to draw much-needed attention to obscured but resonant forms of labor; 2) to articulate the crucial roles of women and people of color, in the production of digital culture and economy; 3) to understand the logic behind the production, circulation, and management of influencer media. The organization of this dissertation roughly traces the consumption cycle of (im)material commodity production, circulation, and discard in influencer cultural production and e-commerce operation: from the process of constructing virtual influencers as digital beings and strategic marketing tools, to mobilizing influencers and logistic workers in selling and delivering physical goods, to the post-consumption stage of managing and tidying up overflowing items. Juxtaposing these three sites of value production and labor extraction carves out a relational space to excavate and assemble different forms of undervalued labor and infrastructure.

The dissertation of Zizi Li is approved.

Jennifer Holt

Denise R. Mann

Jasmine Nadua Trice

Steven Franklin Anderson, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

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Carleton College Social Justice Fund	2014

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Li, Z. "Standing in as a Famed, Diverse Virtual Influencer: Proxy Labor and Identity Construction in Computer-Generated Influencer Production." <i>Velvet Light Trap</i> .	In Press
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Li, Z. "Spectacle and Specter: Handling Boxes In-Between Digital Content Creation, E-Commerce Advertising, and Last-Mile Delivery." <i>Mediapolis</i> .	2024
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Li, Z. "Micro Media Industries: Hmong American Media Innovation in the Diaspora (Review)." <i>Journal of Cinema and Media Studies</i> .	2022
Li, Z. "The Process Genre: Cinema And The Aesthetics Of Labor By Salomé Aguilera Skivirky (Review)" <i>Moving Images</i> .	2020

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"Virtual Influencer Production: (Im)materiality and (In)visibility in Layered Identity Construction." <i>Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS)</i> . Boston, MA.	March 2024
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"Transnational Feminist Encounters and its Social Media Updates: Controversies around Naomi 'Sexy Cyborg' Wu." <i>SCMS</i> . Online.	March 2021
"'I'm not a human, but am I still a person?': A post-human discussion on AI, race, and gender through the case of Miquela." <i>SCMS</i> . Seattle, WA.	March 2019
"The Chriselle Factor: Breaking out of the vicious loop of the entrepreneurial influencer culture?" <i>European Network for Cinema and Media Studies</i> . Amsterdam, Netherlands.	June 2018
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Society for the History of Science and Technology	2023-Present

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world oversaturated with commercial images. Since the advent of social media, advertising is no longer dominated by traditional television commercials, magazine pages, and the like. Ordinary people are now equipped with accessible tools to not only style themselves and perform in aspirational ways, but also turn themselves into images to be seen. How we express ourselves and what tastes we want to project are achieved through different aspects of image production, from the styling of our outfits to the creative direction of our photos. Our hunger to become images that are widely seen and well-liked turns online platforms for personal expression and experimentation with style into battlefields for attention, which in turn confers value. Amateur niche creators in the late 2000s and early 2010s positioned themselves as passionate everyday people in search of a community that shares hobbies such as fashion or makeup. Bloggers and early YouTubers like Susie Lau, Tavi Gevinson, Michelle Pham, and Chiara Ferragni were figuring out how to make money beyond affiliate links and advance the success of their blogs/channels into additional revenue streams. Many of these successful figures eventually became multiplatform influencers with professional production teams and six-figure brand partnerships. Their media content has shifted from more specific and targeted material to generalized lifestyle content. Most of them started their own product lines and brands and ventured into other businesses. As the influencer culture develops, elite influencers become traditional capitalists as owners of many corporate ventures, whereas average and aspiring influencers must hustle to navigate the platform-mediated attention economy for opportunities. As digital media scholar Grant Bollmer and art theorist Katherine Guinness (2024) write in *The Influencer Factory*, elite influencers are not precarious digital creative laborers

struggling to make ends meet. Instead, they are influencer-capitalists who own and control the means of production of self and/as business, from personal branding and communication to manufacturing and supply chains.

Since the mid 2010s, social media creators have become increasingly professionalized and industrialized, accompanied by the rise of influencer marketing. Influencers are professional content creators who generate marketable images and narratives for themselves and brands on social media platforms across genres from fashion and wellness to cars and finance. They are a “contemporary incarnation of internet celebrity for whom microcelebrity is not merely a hobby or supplementary income but an established career with its own ecology and economy” (Abidin 2017, 1). As a born-digital (micro)celebrity on the internet, an influencer is an industrialized identity shaped by the marketing industry that assumes an intermediary position in between brands and consumers (Abidin 2018a; Hund 2023). That is, a social media influencer industry has emerged from performed authenticity with the ability to operationalize this expertise at the nexus of brand marketing, digital media production, and platform economy. With many types of explicit and implicit branded content in both professional and vernacular media circulated on the internet, it has become impossible to escape from commercial images in the media ecosystem. Popular influencer-produced media, such as unboxing and try-on videos, have been mobilized to generate billions in revenue for brands and platforms while further contributing to fast consumption and disposal.¹ Influencer marketing is becoming increasingly popular amongst brands and advertisers due to its high return on investment. Industry marketing research suggests

¹ Unboxing videos are content that capture the experience of opening boxes of items they have purchased and/or are gifted. They tend to feature close-ups of the items along with commentaries from the creator. Relatedly, try-on videos are content that capture the experience of trying on items they have purchased and/or are gifted. They are often overlapping with content that show off shopping hauls and provide first-impression opinions on items.

that businesses earn more than five dollars for every dollar spent on an influencer marketing campaign (Digital Marketing Institute 2024). In 2023, influencer marketing spending rose 3.5 times faster than paid social ad spending (Enberg 2023). The influencer marketing market size was valued at \$17.4 billion in 2023 with an estimated 13.7% growth in 2024 (collabstr 2024). User-generated content platform market size reached \$4.7 billion in 2022 and is estimated to grow to \$71.3 billion by 2031 (Allied Market Research 2023). The global creator economy as a whole was valued as a \$127.65 billion industry in 2023 and is forecasted to reach \$528.39 billion in 2030 (collabstr 2024). In short, the influencer industry is a sizable economic force, and the industry is projecting significant future growth.

For consumers, it is easy to be engulfed by ubiquitous images circulated in the influencer-centric media culture and develop desires for endless new things and experiences. It is also easy for scholars to dismiss commercial lifestyle media as superfluous and unworthy of critical attention. With more than a decade of engagement with influencer cultural production as a consumer, media scholar, and cultural critic, I have grappled with mixed feelings toward influencer media. My research refuses to dismiss widely circulated images on social media as unworthy of critical attention and, further, commits to a more expansive understanding of the industries and labor fundamental to the broader ecosystems of influencer cultural production and commodity networks. Influencer culture and economy must be taken seriously in public discourse and the academy. Ubiquitous images and marketable narratives generated by professional, influential social media content creators are very effective at growing our endless desires for products and experiences. At the same time, they are complex sites that encapsulate and illuminate the material realities, social relations, and power struggles shaped by contemporary capitalism. Influencer practices should not be dismissed as frivolous but, instead,

seriously studied as they are key social practices that exemplify different facets of this platform economy. Brooke Erin Duffy (2022) discussed the ubiquity of influencer culture in all sorts of careers, including academia, journalism, and medicine. Sophie Bishop (2023) used the term “influencer creep” to detail the process of how influencer cultures have originated microcelebrity promotional practices that expand into other forms of work and the lives of different workers. This dissertation is my attempt to assert why we need to take platform-mediated influencer culture and economy seriously in media, visual, and cultural studies. How can studying these ubiquitous images inform us about the world we live in? What are some forms of work and networks of labor that are masked under aesthetic and rhetorical operations of these sumptuous images? How can we cultivate a critical way of viewing and engaging with influencer media and advertising images that attune to both form and matter, surface and infrastructure, center and periphery? Writing at the beginning of the “influencer” turn of advertising and social media cultures, I see this dissertation in part as a historical document that captures a snapshot of the aesthetics, labor conditions, and infrastructures of the ever-growing influencer ecosystem in the mid-2010s to early 2020s.

Specters of the Influencer Ecosystem fosters a greater understanding of how the increasingly popular influencer culture is shifting industrial practices of work in media production while mobilizing an overlooked network of radicalized, gendered precarious laborers from logistical supply chains to home production and management. This project charts the depth and width of the influencer-centric media and commodity economy, expanding beyond the typical conceptualization of the influencer industry at the intersection of advertising, internet, and content industries. I specifically look at media examples from fashion and beauty lifestyle influencers. These social media creators mainly discuss fashion and/or beauty while also

frequently incorporating other aspects of their daily life. In the English-language context, these influencers primarily use visually oriented platforms including Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, along with supplemental spaces like blogs, Twitter, Snapchat, and Pinterest. Content of this nature is often disregarded as trivial and valueless due to the long-standing assumption of fashion/beauty/lifestyle exclusively targeted to women as consumers. Fashion and beauty lifestyle influencer media is, however, the product of a vast, interdependent, and ‘seamless’ network of industries, including digital cultural production, product manufacturing, e-commerce logistics, advertising, marketing, and self/home management, all governed by the socio-technical infrastructure of social media networks.

In this dissertation, I analyze highly feminized fashion and beauty lifestyle influencer media categories, including popular computer-generated influencers, e-commerce media such as PR unboxing haul videos, and closet decluttering videos. In Chapter 1, I examine popular racialized and gendered computer-generated influencers. My close readings demonstrate how these strategically designed “ideal” avatars meet the creator’s fantasies to transcend physical corporeality, the brands’ desires to balance rising demand for on-screen diversity and risk control, the market’s maximization of profits from mainstream beauty standards and capitalist logics of operation, and the industry’s ability to capitalize on the political work performed by diverse identity markers. In Chapter 2, my analysis focuses on how influencers and businesses mobilize the spectacle of delivery boxes in PR unboxing haul videos and e-commerce advertisements to construct an aesthetic of excess, one that signals the seamless circulation of goods and generation of desires. In Chapter 3, I show how popular closet decluttering videos inspired by the KonMari method exemplify the manner in which self-help logics of aspirational self/home management mask the feminized, and often, racialized work of tidying up and other

maintenance work that comes with the act of discarding. Synthesizing these vastly different media texts and their contexts provides valuable insights into the construction of desires toward goods and lifestyle in different stages of a consumption cycle, from production to circulation to disposal.

I primarily analyze YouTube and Instagram in this dissertation. The creators I examine are most active on these platforms, even if they might also be present in other platforms such as TikTok and Twitter. In the years covered by this project, from mid-2010s to early 2020s, YouTube and Instagram are where real monetization takes place and where the majority of influencer marketing budget goes (Bollmer and Guinness 2024). On YouTube, creators post long-form video content and engage with viewers in the comments section, whereas on Instagram, they post photos, short-form videos, and engage with followers through both comments and direct messages. Despite platform-specific aesthetic, temporal, and industrial differences, both YouTube and Instagram facilitate the spectacularization of some laboring bodies and the spectralization of others. Additionally, both platforms are often employed together to construct the selfhood of an influencer and their layers of identity. Recognizing that the popularity and monetization capability of platforms will likely shift with the rapid and constant development in the social media sphere, I believe observations and lessons from digital cultural production on YouTube and Instagram from mid-2010s to early 2020s will still resonate in a broader context.

Popular and academic discourses focus on social media creators as a new class of digital creative workers who market themselves and/as commodities on social media platforms that are engaged by millions of users. Scholarly literature in the fields of media and communication studies have begun to analyze both the precarious and empowering conditions faced by creators,

but the majority of research on influencers has focused on individual creators, with limited attention to the broader context of social media industries and the workers who support it. I argue that our current understanding of influencer work has displaced our ability to recognize the full spectrum of labor that goes into the industrial workflow of influencer media production. In particular, the rhetorical privileging of virtuality, creativity, and flexibility, as well as the aesthetic mode of attention and excess in social media creator cultures, has obscured different kinds of labor at the convergence of digital making and consumption. This feminized and racialized labor by influencers and other workers, such as garment workers and delivery drivers, is often further neglected or marginalized in mainstream critical discourse. I thus intervene by studying influencer labor that is infrastructural: This labor is ubiquitous yet often masked, devalued, rendered peripheral, and historically and continuously performed by women, people of color, immigrants, and working-class people.

In other words, my dissertation excavates traces of labor in the fashion and beauty lifestyle influencer media production workflow and commodity supply chain. I see both social media creators and e-commerce delivery drivers as spectral workers in the influencer-driven economy. Some of their traces are buried, and others are present at the peripheries, and even hypervisible in plain sights. But none of the labor I discuss is truly invisible. They resonate with what literary scholars María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013, 2) describe as spectral and ghostly, occupying this “liminal position between visibility and invisibility, [...] materiality and immateriality.” We can reject a bounded understanding of the influencer industry by centering spectralized forms of labor in the influencer ecosystem. Employing the concept of spectrality in thinking about overlooked labor in influencer-based cultural production and digital economy offers a way to destabilize established structures of power by recognizing the

structuring absence and persistently seeking ghostly presences of productive labor in influencer media texts. Per film scholar Richard Dyer (1993), “a structuring absence refers to an issue, or even a set of facts or an argument, that a text cannot ignore, but which it deliberately skirts round or other wide avoids.” My dissertation rethinks how we engage with ubiquitous influencer media and confronts the social and cultural forces that made some labor peripheral and certain laboring bodies into spectacle. In doing so, this research accomplishes three goals: 1) to draw much-needed attention to obscured but resonant forms of labor; 2) to articulate the crucial roles of women and people of color in the production of digital culture and economy; 3) to understand the logic behind the production, circulation, and management of influencer media indispensable in today’s complex culture of consuming media, goods, and identities.

The chief questions driving this study are: What are some of the influencer ecosystem’s underlying work and systems? Who and what are made hypervisible, shadowed, and spectral? How are operations of global capitalism manifested in the politics of production, circulation, and management in influencer culture and content creation? How can we use influencer media as a site to make sense of and challenge how relationships, responsibility, and accountability are embodied in this economy? I use fashion and beauty lifestyle influencer media to elucidate the often-obscured connections between cultural industries and commodity networks, between the representational ideals and material realities of platform-mediated cultural production through the frameworks of 1) the influencer ecosystem and 2) spectrality. Inspired by the model of the assemblage and its relational nature,² I introduce *the influencer ecosystem* as a framework that integrates the broader workings—e.g., production, circulation, consumption, and management—

² Assemblage is a literary concept raised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the 1970s that describes a relational mode of arrangement consisting of multiple, disparate substances linked together as a whole.

of the influencer culture and economy that embeds gendered, racialized labor as infrastructure in the everyday operation of digital platforms and supply chain networks (Li 2023b, 3). If the influencer ecosystem establishes the width of this project, the critical framework of spectrality ensures its depth, digging down beneath the surface. A spectral critique of influencer images seriously engages the material traces left by specters that suggest something is off. The ghostly presence of different kinds of overlooked work in influencer cultural production debunks the digital machinery's myths of seamlessness and effortlessness. Engaging with the shadows, peripheries, and what seems to be absent can reveal the structuring absences and operating logics that shape our understanding of the influencer culture and economy. Both 'influencer ecosystem' and 'spectrality' thus work together to illuminate the gap between rhetorical/aesthetic operation and material realities, as well as the encounter between spectralized laboring bodies of disparate industries and sectors across varying physical sites and virtual spaces.

Although this chapter will outline the big picture of the influencer ecosystem and relevant scholarly discourses around it, subsequent chapters will concretely examine the interdependent labor across influencer industries through a series of case studies focused on specific media texts, social media platforms, and producers. I combine close reading, socio-techno-cultural industrial analyses, and racial and intersectional feminist critiques to examine highly feminized influencer media genres and categories: computer-generated influencers (Chapter 1), e-commerce media (Chapter 2), and decluttering videos (Chapter 3). I aim to expand our understanding of influencer work by mapping out how the influencer economy mobilizes layered work from multiple sites/industries that are often buried by the creation, circulation, and consumption of marketing media and aspirational images. I deliberately choose media situated at different moments of the marketing and consumption cycle to explore resonances between them. This project thus tries to

understand the operative dimensions of contemporary capitalism through excavating different forms of labor obfuscated by the production and amplification of spectacles in this brand-driven and influencer-centered digital economy.

As described in *Assembly Codes*, “the logics governing [the] operation [of media and information] have been subsumed in service to global supply” (Hockenberry et. al. 2021, 14). Situated at the nexus of three intersecting global operating systems (i.e., media, logistics, and data), social media influencer culture shapes how we consume material and immaterial commodities, and how we interface with media and goods. Studying the e-commerce-driven influencer economy offers insight into how the internet is reorganizing media and logistics work and, by extension, the global labor and commodity supply chains. My dissertation analyzes a snapshot of supply chain capitalism (Tsing 2009), considering the logistics of influencer media production as it links to the logistics of e-commerce operation and home management. It seeks to elucidate connections among social media and commodity networks, material and immaterial labor, creative and menial work, and resource extraction and waste. While influencers, their followers, and brands tend to be imagined as a virtual community, my work reminds us that the community is rooted in participants’ shared interests in material goods and the sales of products. These commodities, along with the very existence of digital social space, are powered by a global network of ghostly (im)material labor. I intend to capture how the social media and commodity chain labor and/as infrastructure are entangled with each other, and to further elucidate what such entanglements enable, hide, engulf, and exclude.³ This project thus gestures

³ Infrastructure includes more than just “hard” material objects; “soft” systems of knowledge production and practices of people are also examples of infrastructure that enable social processes. Drawing from Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey Bowker, I deploy the term “labor and/as infrastructure” in this dissertation to signal the embeddedness of infrastructure in everyday social structures, and its contingency upon hidden labor on multiple ends (e.g. production, operation, maintenance, repair). For more, see: Star and Bowker 1999; Parks and Starsielski 2015.

toward a critical map of influencer media operation and asserts a kind of political and economic visibility to spectralized forms of labor in the influencer ecosystem.

At the same time, I take Eva Haifa Giraud's (2019) question "what comes after entanglement?" seriously, which reorients us to attend to entities being foreclosed by existing relational-material entanglement. What does unraveling the influencer ecosystem do? By disentangling systems of operation, this project denaturalizes certain norms and practices in the production, distribution, consumption, and management of images and material goods. This in turn allows us to question: 1) who and what is excluded from these relations; 2) who and what is made invisible from within these relations; and 3) the operating logics of influencer industries that condition these practices and dynamics. I thus approach influencer labor through the lenses of (im)materiality, (in)visibility, and operating logics. My dissertation examines complex layers of immaterial and material, invisible and hypervisible forces at work in various influencer media. These lines of inquiry allow for a critical perspective that recognizes the deep (im)material entanglement of global capitalism, attends to the spectral and the excluded, and potentially points to ways of mobilizing ethico-political interventions against these capitalist relationships. Before further explicating how I conceptualize and approach studying different kinds of labor as specters of the influencer culture and economy, I will first clarify a number of key analytical and industry terms that recur throughout this dissertation.

Understanding Influencer Culture and Economy: Key Terms and Definitions

Influencers have been largely situated in a lineage of (micro)celebrities on the internet. In 2008, three years after the launch of YouTube, scholar of digital self-performance Theresa Senft published *Camgirls*, a book that traces and studies the practice of a generation of young

American women who acquired internet fame by broadcasting their personal lives via webcams in their bedrooms. *Microcelebrity* as a term was coined to describe the rising phenomenon of ordinary people who formerly followed traditional celebrities but now use the internet to gain fame themselves (Senft 2008, 25). Digital communication scholar Alice Marwick furthers the theory of microcelebrity in her 2013 *Status Update*, examining how Silicon Valley entrepreneurs utilize social media as a tool for networking and self-promotion. Early explorations of microcelebrity (e.g., Senft 2008; Senft 2013; Marwick 2013a) focus on self-branding as a central practice to curate or perform a mediated self-celebrified persona that suggests authenticity, relatability, and interactivity.

For the fashion and beauty lifestyle industries in particular, microcelebrities used blogs to establish their brands and followers in the 2000s and the 2010s, with the dominance of YouTube from the late 2000s to the 2010s and then Instagram since the mid-2010s. The stature of blogging in the fashion industry is exemplified by the controversies that emerged when a few personal style superbloggers were offered front row seats at fashion shows next to top magazine editors. These incidents were read as evidence of the internet's democratizing power, providing a platform that ordinary people could use to break into the elite world of fashion taste-making. Fashion blogs and bloggers are well-researched, with scholarship on genres,⁴ digital mediation,⁵ identity construction and subject formation,⁶ counter narratives,⁷ labor and resources.⁸ My study

⁴ See, for example, Rocamora 2011; Pedroni 2015; Findlay 2015; Findlay 2017.

⁵ See, for example, Rocamora 2012; Rocamora 2017.

⁶ See, for example, Pham 2013; Marwick 2013b; Rocamora 2015; Titton 2015.

⁷ See, for example, Pham 2011; Harju and Huovinen 2015; Lewis 2015; Pedroni and Pofi 2018.

⁸ See, for example, Pham 2015; Pedroni 2015; Duffy and Hund 2015; Bridges and Sjöholm 2019.

continues building on this robust body of literature, especially the ones examining the conditions of blogging labor.

By 2010, brands and advertisers had recognized microcelebrities like bloggers and YouTubers as relatively cheap but highly effective marketing channels. This transition from showcasing one's opinions to authentic advertising of products received from brands and, later, paid partnership with brands has become the foundation of the influencer economy (Hund 2019, 25). Blogs, YouTube, and Instagram have followed legacy media in becoming financially dependent on advertisers. After this shift, digital content creators were mainstreamed and could no longer be viewed as people rising to fame outside of the corporate media environment. Today, microcelebrities engage in highly formalized and commercialized practices that involve a variety of creative industry professionals, mass media outlets, and audiences in addition to themselves (Usher 2020). In other words, microcelebrity has been industrialized. Cultural sociologist Marco Pedroni (2023) marks the second half of the 2000s as the beginning of professionalization and commodification for fashion blogging as it started to gain legitimacy within the fashion industry. The first half of the 2010s, he observes, is a period of institutionalization wherein we see fashion bloggers further formalizing their transmedia production practices across personal websites, YouTube, and other social media platforms. Since 2015, we have seen traditional fashion blogs being gradually replaced by Instagram posts and branded. Fashion bloggers, YouTubers, and Instagrammers have now become fashion influencers or, rather, lifestyle influencers in general, as many have leveraged their success in fashion influencing to enter adjacent fields like beauty, health, and home. This general trend is applicable to other industries as well.

But what are *social media influencers*? Business research tends to position influencers as mediators between brands and customers (Schaefer 2012; Solis 2012; Hallam 2013). In the

context of influencer marketing, the term *influencer* is often referred to as the “industry vernacular for the bloggers, Instagrammers, Pinners, and other social media users who [...] deliver curated content to audiences on social media and earn income by collaborating with major brands” (Hund 2019, 1). But influencers are also a specific kind of internet celebrity who are “vocational, sustained, and highly branded social media stars” with the capability to maintain a sizable following on platforms through personalized content production that promotes products or services (Abidin 2018a, 71). Influencers, then are also a subset of *digital content creators*, people who work to produce content on the internet (Green 2016, para 6). If the early years of the internet were dominated by amateur, user-generated content, creator culture has become industrialized, with occupational creators as “commercializing and professionalizing native social media users who generate and circulate original content in close interaction and engagement with their communities on the major social media platforms as well as offline” (Cunningham and Craig 2021, 1). While there are differences between social media influencers and digital content creators, I use influencers and creators almost interchangeably in this dissertation. After all, social media influencers are influential content creators on digital platforms. Drawing from definitions by Abidin, Cunningham and Craig, I use the terms influencer and creator to recognize these individuals as trained professionals who practice media creation for commercialization and fame. Since I intend to place influencers in a wide network of workers and agents operationalized within the influencer ecosystem, I also position influencers and creators as relational actors, including and going beyond the sole role of the mediator between brands and consumers.

The industrialization of microcelebrities and influence has yielded the contemporary influencer industry. An industry refers to the people or entities engaged in a particular form of

productive or commercial enterprise. *The influencer industry*, therefore, includes individuals and companies involved in the production of social media influencers and influencer marketing. Social media researcher Emily Hund (2019/2023) lays out four key players in the influencer industry: individuals who pursue online influence and persuasion; advertisers and brands/retailers who seek influencers to sell products; social media companies who provide the platforms and dictate the rules/algorithms; and intermediary entities, like marketing agencies and analytics companies, who measure influence and negotiate between influencers and brands. Notably, however, the influencer industry quantifies and commodifies not only industry professionals/workers but also casual social media users who may not necessarily see themselves as part of the industry. Digital culture theorist Tiziana Terranova's essay "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy" (2000), published at the turn of the 21st century, has been foundational to understanding how unwaged pleasure productive activities by all digital media users have been central to and heavily exploited by the internet and knowledge economy. Decades ago, before the mainstream popularization of digital media usage, communication scholar Dallas Smythe critiqued the model of advertising-funded mass media for turning viewers into "audience commodity" (1977) as their time is sold to advertisers for free. This critique continues to be relevant in the age of advertising-funded internet and social media. Internet researcher Tim Hwang (2020) shows that digital advertising has been at the center of the tech industry, that big tech are essentially ad-tech that profit off of commodifying attention data gathered from everyday users. We all are social media workers in one way or another.

Here, I expand on Hund's definition and propose the usage of a plural variation: *influencer industries*. In particular, I am inspired by *social media industries* as a plural concept that "focus[es] on all forms of work using or producing social media content (Jacobson 2017, 9).

Communication scholar Jenna Jacobson introduces the term to analyze distinct work performed in multiple social media professions and the work practices of these different social media industry workers. *Influencer industries* encompass different expected and unexpected types of work in support of the influencer economy. On the one hand, I am referring to how influencer/social media work demands multi-faceted skillsets associated with varying legacy cultural industries from modeling and performance to editing and visual effects. This is an aspect I will discuss in Chapter 1 in relation to the production of virtual influencers. On the other hand, I am actively bringing sectors traditionally not considered as part of the creative cultural economy (e.g., logistical work and housework) into the conversation. This aspect will be explored more in depth in Chapters 2 and 3. The influencer industries as a plural concept allows us to consider work that takes place within the operation of the influencer economy, regardless of whether the work is performed by a typical influencer industry professional. This project fundamentally rejects a neat and self-evident understanding of *the* influencer industry and its supposedly bounded site (Caldwell 2013). The influencer industries are messy and always shifting. In a way, this dissertation takes up cinema studies scholar Nitin Govil's (2013, 173) question of "how are industries made up": What are the conditional activities, forms, spaces and places, and procedures that make up influencer industries? What kinds of labor and infrastructures are joined together by influencer cultural production?

In other words, the common understanding of the influencer industry is narrow, including firms and individuals whose work is directly involved in the production, facilitation, and measurement of online influence. Such a bounded conception, however, limits a comprehensive perception of all the forms of work that support influencer cultural production and the creator economy. I thus propose the plural concept of influencer industries to encompass typical and

atypical work that contribute to the infrastructural operation of influencer culture. The case studies examined in this dissertation include works performed by creators themselves and works dependent on other humans, from body doubles in visual effects production to delivery drivers in e-commerce logistics. These works occur in the typical influencer industry (e.g., digital cultural production and marketing), the broader creative industries (e.g., visual effect production and fashion modeling), and seemingly unrelated fields (e.g., waste management and e-commerce logistics). The influencer ecosystem is a framework inclusive of the assemblage and relational aspects of influencer culture and economy, including production, circulation, consumption, and management. This project unravels the influencer ecosystem to excavate traces of labor in influencer media production workflow and commodity supply chains that are ubiquitous yet often hidden in plain sight.

Another related colloquial term is the economy. *The procrastination economy* refers to the activities and efforts by media and tech companies related to monetizing our downtime, and how we navigate our everyday in-between moments using mobile devices (Tussey 2018). The proliferation and popularity of social media platforms and influencer media production take the procrastination economy to a whole another level. Producing and consuming content become the norm of not only how we spend and value our time, but also how we interact with others and optimize our value following the logic of commodification. Popular terms relevant to this project include the social media economy, the platform economy, and the attention economy. *The social media economy* can be understood as “the broad spectrum of roles and activities that capitalize on individuals’ social media audiences for commercial purposes” (Jacobson 2017, 31). *The platform economy* encompasses “digitally enabled activities in business, politics, and social interaction” that are organized around digital platforms (Kenney and Zysman 2016, 62). *The*

attention economy came about in our current age of information overload wherein everyday people's attention has been quantified, commodified, and become integral to most businesses' revenue strategy (Goldhaber 1997; Goldhaber 2006; Hwang 2020). I am concerned how some of these terms overemphasize the newness of the current economy and focus entirely on the digital environment in a way that de-materializes the reality of operations. Goldhaber's conception of the attention economy, for instance, assumes that capitalism no longer needs to be concerned with the production and distribution of goods and services due to the ascendant importance of the attention economy. If anything, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic proved the centrality of physical manufacturing, logistics, and service industries to economies dominated by platform-based social media.

As such, I understand *the digital economy*—broadly used to signal the so-called new economy initiated with the rise of the Internet—as it continues co-existing with, expanding, and incorporating the traditional economy. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (2022), the digital economy includes four main components: infrastructure, e-commerce, priced digital service, and federal non-defense digital services. In its broadest sense, the digital economy contains all industries that incorporate and/or produce digital infrastructure, equipment, services, software, and data. The influencer economy and industries fall within the parameters of the digital economy. Up to this point, I have used *the influencer economy* or *the creator economy* to refer to a wide range of activities, roles, and work supporting the influencer and creator industries. I posit the influencer economy as a kind of digital economy driven by social media users, platforms, e-commerce, and digital marketing while also heavily relying on traditional manufacturing and logistics. In a systematic review of literature, economics scholars Iryna Radionova and Iryna Trots (2021, 57) identify creators, platforms, consumers/co-creators, and

business representatives as the four pillars of the creator economy. My definition, however, is different in that I emphasize how we must understand influencer and creator economies as simultaneously platform-based, attention-based, and material-based.

I have previously referred to *the influencer ecosystem* as “an ecosystem that crosses private-versus-public and virtual-versus-physical boundaries,” including “the production, circulation, consumption, maintenance, and waste of the influencer culture/economy that embeds labor as infrastructure in the everyday operation of digital platforms and commodity networks” (Li 2023b, 3). While my usage of the terms influencer industries and influencer ecosystem complement each other, they are not interchangeable. In this project, *the influencer industries* refers to professionals and their work in the influencer economy, whereas *the influencer ecosystem* is a relational materialist framework to study the ensemble of processes, systems, and operations that make possible the influencer industries and economy (Kallinikos and Mariátegui 2011). The influencer ecosystem traces labor and/as infrastructure on and beyond social media platforms, arguing that the focus on varying interconnected forms of labor involved provide insights into the industrial formation and entanglements of the influencer industries. The study of influencer labor, infrastructure, and industries go hand in hand, with each falling under the framework of an influencer ecosystem.⁹

⁹ The influencer ecosystem as a term also sits at the intersection of media ecology, environment, and ecosystem. *Media ecology* treats media/communication systems as environments, studying their structure, content, and impact (Postman 1970; Nystrom 1973). Ecology is used metaphorically, drawing upon biology, systems theory, and cybernetics, to study the media environment and how media impact humans (Milberry 2012). Environments, in this context, refers to complex systems wherein humans are conditioned to think and behave in a certain way (Postman 1970). In this dissertation, my use of the term influencer ecosystem addresses the environment mostly metaphorically. The influencer ecosystem encompasses an ensemble of processes, systems, and operations that condition the influencer industries and economy. Here, we have a kind of influencer media environment coming from the media ecology tradition. Yet this dissertation also gestures toward the massive amount of waste generated by influencer-driven consumption, especially in Chapter 3 on closet decluttering videos. I see these decluttering contents analyzed as both resource media—drawing from Bozak (2011)’s “the resource image”—and media that can offer a means to address the latent ecological and social damages produced by traditional industrial and digital managerial processes. I plan to develop the ecological aspect of my argument beyond metaphor in future research.

The Breadth of Labor in the Influencer Ecosystem

My research elucidates how the influencer ecosystem mobilizes racial, gendered, and classed labor from both its media and commodity supply chains. While some works are performed by influencers and creators themselves, many works also rely on the labor of other humans and technologies. Many of these works are performed in the broader creative industries (e.g., self-branding, relationship management, visual effect production, modeling), while others are in seemingly unrelated fields (e.g., housework, management, and logistics). Some take place on social media platforms in the digital realm, whereas others are more grounded in the immediate physical environment. Many occur in the private but increasingly public domestic sphere, while others arise in marginal public spaces. Some are abstract, and others are highly tangible. Many are visible or even hypervisible whereas others are at the margins or concealed. In this dissertation, I investigate the material assemblages and precarious labor at play in three fashion and beauty lifestyle media categories: virtual influencers on Instagram who often collaborate with fashion and beauty brands; e-commerce influencer media, ranging from beauty PR unboxing videos to e-commerce platform advertisements featuring influencers; and closet decluttering videos created by fashion lifestyle influencers. These different feminized influencer media categories are created in vastly different contexts, from professional production studios to individuals' homes. I bring them together to make sense of the material relations across different sites of cultural production, laboring activities, and value extraction in the age of social media influencer culture, brand economy, and logistics operation. This dissertation thus attempts to capture the considerable breadth of labor supporting the operation of influencer economies,

drawing from film and visual studies, critical digital and race studies, feminist media studies, platform labor studies, industry and production studies, and supply and infrastructure studies.

Scholars have started to grapple with the parameters of social media influencer industry. As previously discussed, Jacobson introduces “social media industries” (2017, 22) as a plural term to analyze distinct work performed in multiple social media professions and the work practices of these different social media industry workers. Media industry scholars Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2019, 5) propose “social media entertainment” as an industry of amateur content creators attempting to professionalize through various media formats and to develop businesses based on their followings across platforms. Hund (2019, 29-30) defines “the influencer industry” as individuals and companies involved in the production of social media influencers and influencer marketing. Digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin (2018, 71) further expands “the Influencer industry”¹⁰ to also include overlooked endeavors like “the emerging shadow economy that supports the black market of Influencer commerce.” Media and culture researcher Sarah Edwards (2022), for instance, sees influencer retreats as a growing “influencer para-industry” and key sites of influencer professionalization.¹¹ What draws all of these models together is the placing of influencers within a network comprising themselves, ordinary social media users, business owners and brand executives, marketers and technologists, social media corporations, intermediaries like talent managers and trend forecasters, and regulatory bodies (Hund 2023, 6, 11).

¹⁰ Abidin intentionally capitalizes “Influencer” to distinguish her focus on the culture and societal role of Influencers from existing business research that tends to position influencers as a mediator.

¹¹ Influencer retreats are paid educational bootcamps created with the goal to professionalize and profit from aspiring content creators and their labor. They provide participants with opportunities to interact with industry insiders and professionals who serve as retreat leaders and guest speakers. These programs teach a combination of production skillsets and industry lore to participants through workshops and talks. Participants generally also produce unpaid branded content throughout the retreat as hands-on practice.

Workers who labor in sectors that are not immediately related to social media and marketing, such as motion capture actors in visual effect production and delivery drivers for last-mile logistics, are typically not included in conversations surrounding the influencer media and creator economy workforce. My dissertation thus fills this gap by demonstrating how influencer industries encompass a wide range of (un)expected and overlooked work that is obfuscated by the logics of influencer media at the nexus of digital cultural industries and e-commerce businesses. This expanded approach to labor in the influencer ecosystem shows the media and cultural industries as a messy, complex system comprising many embedded production systems (Caldwell 2023), interdependent sectors of operation, and nested precarious labor (Duffy et al. 2021). One accessible way to approach the complexity of the system is to be proactive and intentional with how we engage with images, objects, discourses, and para-texts produced and circulated in the influencer ecosystem. This project employs a critical viewing of influencer media to locate the encounters amongst different kinds of creative labor, as well as encounters between creative and other forms of labor. Close reading of influencer media texts reveals spectralized productive activities and laboring bodies. Critical cultural analysis of influencer media production further unpacks normalized exploitative, extractive labor practices, and the industrial logics guiding them.

Drawing from sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato's (1996) conception of the post-Fordist labor that produces the informational/cultural product, political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004, 108) define immaterial labor as "labor that creates immaterial products." Such labor combines intellectual with creative labor and is frequently differentiated from manual labor (96). The slippage of the term "immaterial labor" – from labor that creates immaterial products to labor that is itself immaterial – is worth a pause. Hardt and Negri (2004, 109) clarify

that even though immaterial labor produces an immaterial product, the labor involved is material, even if the term is often used in a disembodied way. Theorizations of digital immaterial labor frequently dematerialize the labor involved in producing immaterial products like cultural platform content productions. Communication scholar Christian Fuchs (2008, 186) states that “the difference [of the labor that characterizes Web 2.0 systems] to manual labor is that it does not primarily change the physical condition of things, but the emotional and communicative aspects of human relations.” Yet digital labor does have major material impacts on individuals, communities, platforms, industries, and the environment. Physical labor enables the production of affect, intimacy, creativity, and knowledge. Despite the tendency to consider creative and affective labor as immaterial and manual labor as physical, all three labor categories involve/integrate physical, intellectual, and communicative aspects. As such, I use terms “(im)material labor” and “(im)materiality” in this dissertation, using “(im)” to underscore the nested immaterial and material dimensions of digital cultural production.

Far too little scholarly attention has been paid to addressing labor that underlies the rhetoric of creativity and the immateriality presumed to define the typical site of digital cultural production. A similar tendency to dematerialize digital/media culture and fetishize creativity/virtuality is not uncommon across objects and areas of study in cinema and media studies, cultural studies, and related fields. Media and cultural studies’ literature on digital media labor often focuses on “creative labor,” which is often referred to as work “geared to the production of original or distinctive commodities that are primarily aesthetic and/or symbolic-expressive, rather than utilitarian and function” (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009, 416). This emphasis on the creative and the immaterial provides a very narrow understanding of what digital/media/cultural industries are, especially in light of the diversity of its labor pool (Deuze

2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).¹² Put differently, we need more scholarship that will unsettle, rather than reinforce, the existing cultural hierarchical valuation of work that not only prioritizes creativity but also limits what creative work is or could be by insisting on differences between “knowledge” work and “rote” work. This means we need to pay more attention to below-the-line, outsourced, and intersectional feminist studies of digital cultural production, which examine spatial-racial-gendered capitalism through specific sites of capital production and extraction. There is room for more research that looks beyond the façade of the digital economy to render visible the many entangled yet overlooked relationships between different kinds of digital workers (including many of whom we do not normally think of as digital laborers), and the dependencies between them.

In a way, my research studies influencer media to excavate the material operations of influencer ecosystem, especially concerning the interdependence between digital creative precarity and the influencer *undergig* (Precarity Lab 2020). The undergig refers to a class of extra-precious labor in the gig-based digital creative economy that are considered as more infrastructural, menial, and “dated” in (in)formal economies, like factory work and housework. These often-overlooked workers in untenable, undervalued, and underappreciated conditions enable the operations of capital yet derive no benefits from the system, as the latter “ensures enough to sustain the lives of those it employs in conditions of impoverishment” (Precarity Lab 2020). This dissertation considers the different entangled forms of overlooked labor in/between the digital creative class and the undergig class mobilized by the influencer culture and economy. Looking at spectrality in the influencer ecosystem makes legible the forcible, imbricated

¹² There are exceptions where media scholars defy categorizations of labor and connect creative labor with infrastructural labor in varying ways, including Vicki Mayer’s *Below the Line* (2012).

processes of modularity, abstraction, obfuscation, and dispossession in consumer cultures, social media creator economies, and digital capitalism broadly.

My attempt to conceptualize influencer labor in a more holistic way builds on foundational literature concerning the feminized nature of creator work to build visibility, connection, and authenticity (Abidin 2016; Baym 2015; Duffy 2017). Such individual pursuits of being hypervisible, relatable, and real are professionalized and commodified in the formation of the influencer cultural production industry. This project builds on feminist media scholarship by writers such as Kylie Jarret (2014; 2015), Brooke Erin Duffy (2016; 2017), and Christine H. Tran (2022), which has firmly established the feminized nature of social media work and the home as an essential site of digital cultural production. Chapter 3 of this dissertation, which examines the highly feminized, home-based production of closet decluttering videos, aligns with the lineage of this area of scholarship. At the same time, I caution against the limitation of perceiving home-based digital cultural production as only mobilizing labor bounded within the home. Home is a key site in the influencer production network, connected to sites of value production outside of the home, such as e-commerce delivery vans in Chapter 2 and visual effect production studios in Chapter 1.¹³ Both exterior sites are often assumed to be masculine in nature, yet my research shows the centrality of women of color as constructed commodities and as (im)material, (in)visible laborers in commercial image production and goods distribution. In other words, this dissertation excavates the entangled “creative” and “menial” labor across different laboring sites of digital cultural production and e-commerce operation. My work is thus

¹³ I am aware that *The Influencer Factory: A Marxist Theory of Corporate Personhood of YouTube* (Bollmer and Guinness 2024) approaches the influencer culture through examining how elite capitalist influencers mobilize backgrounds of capital including house, car, market, and warehouse to create the indistinguishable logics of self and the corporation. Despite both considering sites of production, my dissertation is more interested in who/what are being rendered visible and peripheral in these production spaces, and what these (in)visibilities inform us about the power dynamics and the precarious conditions of labor in digital cultural production.

in conversation with scholarship that challenges the assumptions underlying “innovation,” “creativity,” and “seamlessness” to make visible the global digital/media labor and resource chains to account for the massive range of work and value extraction that goes into the vibrant operation of digital/creative industries and technical/cultural infrastructures. Key areas specific to considering the infrastructural labor of digital/social media include scholarship in digital gig work and platform labor (Gray and Suri 2019; Irani 2015), content moderation (Roberts 2019), and disinformation-for-hire (Grohmann and Ong 2024). My dissertation adds to this body of research that reveals different ghost work of digital media, but I consider spectral operations of influencer culture and economy less in areas of digital technical infrastructure and more regarding infrastructural labor in media production and commodity circulation.

I thus also draw from media and cultural studies scholarship that thinks through production labor in the study of digital/media/cultural infrastructures. Vicki Mayer’s 2011 book *Below the Line*, for example, is a seminal text that challenges the common definition of media producers as above-the-line creative personnel and problematizes how both industries and scholars have maintained labor hierarchies. Mayer upends the overemphasizing of terms of “creator” and “creative labor” in the new television economy by highlighting hidden populations within the industries. She sheds light on overlooked labor that operates the industrial infrastructures of the television economy via ethnographic-inspired case studies of TV-set assembly line workers, soft-core videographers, reality-program casters, and television regulators. The book evaluates how identities of varied invisible producers have been constructed in and through their work as part of the new television economy. Mayer constantly asks the important question: Whose labor contributes to television production? She redefines

what a producer is and can be by attending to multiple forms of production labor and creativity, which opens a provocative, anti-auteurist understanding of digital/media/cultural producers.

It is this anti-auteurist model of feminist production studies that encourages me to challenge how influencer labor has been commonly understood and to approach the influencer network with a more expansive mindset. Who are the producers of the influencer economy? What kinds of labor and/as infrastructure does the influencer ecosystem function upon? Miranda Banks (2018, 157) outlines the feminist lineage in production studies and its pursuit in speaking truth to power hierarchies and inequities by centering “production at the margins” and highlighting otherwise hidden and peripheral labor. My investigation of nested tidying labor in closet decluttering videos (Chapter 3) fits in the larger body of work on feminized digital labor, such as relational labor (Baym 2015) and aspirational labor (Duffy 2016), that are part of the feminist production studies tradition. Furthermore, I expand narrow understandings of terms like “influencer labor,” typically used to describe the labor performed by social media influencers in support of their content creation, by focusing on hidden populations of workers and overlooked laboring activities within influencer industries, like stand-in performers for famed computer-generated influencers (Chapter 1) and logistical workers delivering boxes that enables the flourishing of unboxing videos (Chapter 2). Because popular computer-generated influencers such as Lil Miquela and Shudu necessitate an engagement with narratives produced from within spaces of power and privilege, I take an intersectional approach to unpacking the racialized and gendered power dynamics at play between above-the-line creators and below-the-line personnels manifested in both the technical production processes and strategic designs of these digital characters. By attending to atypical workers usually excluded from discussions of influencer

culture and economy, this research highlights production at the peripheries and complicated questions of insider/outsider status.

My insistence on integrating discussions of labor and commodity circulation is also inspired by fashion and internet scholar Minh-Ha T. Pham's attempt to connect "creative" influencer labor with "menial" manufacturing labor in her 2015 book *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet*. Pham examines elite Asian personal style bloggers—primarily English-speaking, diasporic Asians in the United States and England—in a historically situated and historically conditioned way that places these bloggers in the longer historical context of gendered, racial fashion work and the history of Asian fashion labor, as well as the rise of Asian visibility and aesthetics in the twenty-first century as driven by the ascendancy of Asian economies and markets. Pham conducts a critical cultural study of fashion labor and economies in the digital era that is attentive to the paradoxical nature of the Internet, the critical history of Asian fashion labor, the geopolitical economy of Asia, and the particularity of cultural taste and capital. My dissertation teases out some deep connections between interface labor (visible, audience-facing, "creative" work) and infrastructural labor (spectral, back-end, "menial" work). It highlights often overlooked players and paradoxes that are essential to the fashion and beauty lifestyle influencer culture and economy, a blooming industry within the global capitalism and digital culture. I will also go beyond the typical discourse and understanding of production labor (e.g. fashion influencers as digital producers, garment workers as manual producers) to make visible the many entangled processes and logics underlying the operation of the influencer ecosystem. My dissertation thus contributes to critical political economy and digital/creative labor theories through its continued attempts to unsettle how we classify and naturalize influencer work and digital labor by examining the complex ecosystem of fashion and beauty lifestyle influencer

culture. This ecosystem contains the entangled operations of waged and non-waged labor extraction from the chains of precarious workers in influencer media production, home management, e-commerce marketing, and retail logistics. By taking an expanded view of influencer industrial and infrastructural labor, this project rethinks labor value, forms and circuits of labor, and sites of production in digital culture as they relate to race, gender, sexuality, and class.

In short, my dissertation captures the considerable breadth of labor supporting influencer economies; it also unsettles the cultural hierarchy that privileges creativity, knowledge work, and seamlessness. In particular, I advocate for rethinking the way we discuss digital work by centering spectralized forms of labor (Gordon 2008; Chung 2018). Overlooked productive activities and laboring bodies can be creative or menial, immaterial or material, hidden or hypervisible. They are obfuscated by the logics of maximizing attention and capital accumulation guiding the operation of digital cultural industries and e-commerce business. This dissertation deploys the critical framework of spectrality to seek the ghostly matters in the influencer ecosystem by closely examining the material realities of influencer cultural texts. My research contributes to the much-needed effort of attending to the nested exploitation experienced by both digital creative workers—e.g., independent creators, marketing professionals, and VFX technicians—as well as undergig laborers—e.g., surrogate performers, logistical workers, and maintenance workers (Precarity Lab 2019). Influencer media production becomes an interface to understand the precarious material realities of different types of labor, as well as the racializing and gendering logics undergirding the influencer ecosystem. This demands us to adopt a spectral vision, the ability to recognize the ghostly presence of

undervalued productive labor and to identify the material traces left by shadowed laborers of the influencer ecosystem within the media text itself (Chung 2018).

Spectacular Images, Ghostly Labor, and Industrial Logics

A specter is a ghostly, shadowed figure that traverses boundaries. It occupies the liminal space in between presence and absence, past and present, the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial. Starting with philosopher Jacques Derrida's (1993) conception of spectrality and theory of hauntology, spectral critiques have become a scholarly means to destabilize existing structures of power, facilitate understandings of past and present disempowerments, and to excavate those who are present yet ignored. Spectrality is often mobilized to signal a different kind of temporality. Derrida has linked the spectral to a politics of memory and the ability to address dispossessing histories. In the arts, hauntology invokes an aesthetic preoccupied with temporal disjunction and cultural memories of the past. Albeit not an explicitly historical project, this dissertation debunks common myths associated with the digital, including newness, immateriality, effortlessness, and equal opportunity. There is a temporal element to what I see as spectralized forms of labor: the presence of "older" kinds of productive labor and laboring activities that are not inherently deemed digital nor creative but continue to be the basis for influencer-based digital economy. The spectralized forms of labor discussed throughout this dissertation enact different means to interrupt the present, haunt viewers, and invite us to unearth beneath the surface of what we observe. Hye Jean Chung (2018) uses "spectral vision," a concept that suggests the need to recognize the ghostly presence of productive labor, to identify material traces of hidden labor in transnational film production workflows. In this dissertation, I also deploy a spectral vision in part to interrogate labor,

visuality, and materiality in the context of influencer ecosystem. In what follows, I will trace four dimensions of spectrality, linking the spectral to discussions of (1) visibility and visuality, (2) materiality and immateriality, (3) labor and work, and (4) identity and difference.

Specter and phantom are etymologically linked to the Greek verb *phainesthai* (to seem, to appear, to reveal oneself) and related to the notion of (in)visibility. Visibility refers to a state of being able to be seen or the seeable, while invisibility implies the opposite, of being in a state of the unseeable. Spectrality is a useful framework that troubles the seemingly dualistic paring of visibility versus invisibility. As a figure that is at once present and absent, the specter reveals its ghostly presence at unexpected moments and sites through tangible traces detectable by our sensory faculty. I thus find it valuable to conduct close reading of hypervisible influencer media to perceive key matters of concern, such as labor and industrial logics, in these seemingly unvaluable images in the culture of hyper-consumption and hyper-commodification.

Hypervisibility describes a state where at the overrepresentation of certain images of a marginalized subject in fact obfuscates that subject in the broader discursive environment.

Cultural critic Laura Kipnis (1988, 158) theorizes visibility as “a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness.” The regime of visibility is contradictory, featuring a double play of invisibility and hypervisibility. What is perceived as invisible is not necessarily absent. What is presented as hypervisible is not necessarily truthfully there. This tension is also reflected in the term “hyper(in)visibility,” which refers to the scenario wherein marginalized bodies are subjected to excessive attention and scrutiny while the subjects are ignored and disregarded at the same time (Gailey 2014; Petermon 2014). Hyper(in)visibility thus encapsulates the simultaneity of visibility and invisibility. Influencer visual culture is conditioned by the tension between spectacles and

specters, between the hypervisible and the unseen/overlooked. Spectralized forms of labor in the influencer ecosystem are also positioned in spectrums of (in)visibility, from being the hyperspectral to being present yet peripheral on screen, and from being in the shadow to being intentionally hidden.

This dissertation performs a spectral critique of the current influencer-centered visual culture by attending to nested mobilizations of labor embedded in vernacular visibility, our everyday engagement with influencer culture's construction of vision and articulation of sociality (Foster 1988; Mirzoeff 2011). In my analysis of commercialized and industrialized production of images by on social media platforms, the framework of spectrality grounds my understanding of how the specter disrupts the spectacular images of computer-generated influencers (Chapter 1), excessively stacked delivery boxes (Chapter 2), and gigantic piles of clothing (Chapter 3). These ornamental surfaces capture the tension between the spectral and a certain kind of social order that philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004) calls the "distribution of the sensible." The distribution of the sensible delineates what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible. The figure of the spectral unsettles the established aesthetic regime, which in turn, enables a redistribution of the sensible, or a critical reordering of what we value.

This dissertation attends to the spectrality, or what sociologist Avery Gordon (2008) calls "ghostly matters," of the influencer ecosystem, a key interface of the contemporary social life and realities. Ghostly matters as a term not only articulates the specter as a social figure but also emphasizes its tangible, material traces and thereby affirms the materiality of the specter:

"The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is

haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening” (Gordon 2008, 8).

The critical framework of spectrality as deployed by Gordon sees the figure of the spectral as a productive force that is real and which produces material effects rooted in between the spectacular and the shadowed, the official and the minor. How and where do we find the ghostly matters of the influencer-centered digital culture and economy? When and where do the specters of the influencer ecosystem interrupt, announce themselves from the shadows, or give notice that something is missing from the highly visible yet simultaneously invisible images of influencer media production? Gordon (2008, 25) suggests looking at constructed cultural texts wherein lie “the ensemble of cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence.” A spectral critique thus looks for both the material residues and the immaterial effects of a cultural production, and how these (im)material experiences are interwoven in a particular sociopolitical context. The journey of seeking specters is a process of writing a ghost story to reveal and make sense of the different sets of negotiation taking place in the liminal space of the in-between. One way of writing ghost stories of digital media cultures, I propose, is to consider spectralized forms of labor in the material realities of influencer-centered social media production and how they appear and/or are absent from these popular media and cultural texts.

Anthropologists, sociologists, and communication scholars studying social media creator work have used combinations of focus groups, semi-structured interviews, participant-observation, and digital ethnography to understand how influencers and creators, aspiring or not, mobilize a wide range of often unrecognized work: visibility labor (Abidin 2016b), tacit labor (Abidin 2016a), aspirational labor (Duffy 2017), glamor labor (Wissinger 2015), and off-camera

labor (Johnson 2021), to name a few.¹⁴ This collection of work practices oscillates in between visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality. Some may be present on-screen yet buried, or rendered unnoticeable by overloaded visual and rhetorical information; others may be kept off-screen yet still leave tangible impacts and material traces on the media production. The overlooked work of digital creative workers tends to make appearances through authenticity-enhancing methods, such as vlogs and vlog-like practices that document certain behind-the-scenes workflows and experiences. I study a range of behind-the-scenes videos by studios, brands, and creators that perform calibrated authenticity. These process videos at once capture the performance of authenticity and reveal certain workflows, productive activities, and (im)material labor taking place in the background. As media in-between the real and the fake, staged process videos become a liminal space wherein spectralized forms of labor and material realities of the influencer ecosystem can more easily resurface.

A common theme across influencer labor scholarship focuses on exploring the precarious conditions of creative labor against the internet's promise of visibility.¹⁵ Precarity in the context of work can be understood as "the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract labor and a loss of state provisioning" (Han 2018, 332). This tendency to the digital creative class stems from the Marxist autonomist tradition wherein the figure of creative worker has become illustrative of the experience of precarity in the supposedly hot and promising digital

¹⁴ Visibility labor is the work one performs in the process of creating and curating presentations of oneself to be noticeable and well-received by various audience. Tacit labor refers to how seemingly effortless work becomes under-visualized because of careful planning and rehearsal. Aspirational labor is a kind of forward-looking work aspiring creators perform to envision themselves to be soon compensated for their talents. Glamor labor can be understood as all the work of managing and optimizing all aspects of one's body, image, and style. Off-camera labor refers to a wide range of behind-the-scenes work undertaken by creators and aspiring creators, from designing aesthetic elements for one's channels to building and managing a community.

¹⁵ See, for example, Duffy et al. 2021; Glatt 2023.

cultural industry: “negotiating short term, insecure, poorly paid, precarious work in conditions of structural uncertainty” (Gill and Pratt 2008, 20). However, precarity as experienced by the digital creative class is only one of many precarities and struggles experienced in this networked contemporary social life. Precarity is the living condition for many in this current digital capitalism, but not all these precarities are equally seen and perceived as urgent. The influencer ecosystem is a site to tease out nested labor exploitation and capital accumulation experienced by the digital creative class and the undergig class. The influencer undergig laborers provide taken-for-granted work infrastructural to this gig-based influencer economy’s frictionless back-end operation but are often rendered as unvaluable, menial, outdated, and replaceable. They are surrogate workers who perform the ghost work on behalf of marketed automated technologies and in place of virtual characters in Chapter 1. They are logistical workers who pack and deliver countless products to fulfill the promise of a seamless e-commerce experience in Chapter 2. They are maintenance workers who manage and care for homes, streets, and stores in Chapter 3. As cultural theorist Peter Hitchcock (1999, 159) writes, “the reality of class as spectral does not mean it does not exist; it means merely that one grasps the immaterial as also and already constituent of material reality.” This dissertation recognizes the undergig class as a spectralized class of influencer labor and/as infrastructure that haunts the opulent influencer cultural landscape to tell ghost stories of their precarious material realities.

Social relations and subject positions like race, gender, and sexuality are also spectral presences. The evocation of the spectral as forgotten and out of place often links spectrality with the subaltern. Spectrality is commonly mobilized in cultural imaginations to redress dispossessing histories and envisage alterative futures. Spectralized subjects, such as ghosts and zombies, often appear in popular cultural texts produced by marginalized communities haunted

by political, economic, and environmental violence enabled by certain forms of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, totalitarianism, racism, sexism, ableism. At the same time, normative subject positions of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality also operate in a ghostly manner. The hegemony of whiteness, for instance, has silently permeated across regimes of representation through “neutral” technical standards and industrial traditions that continuously invisibilize practices of racialization (White 1997).

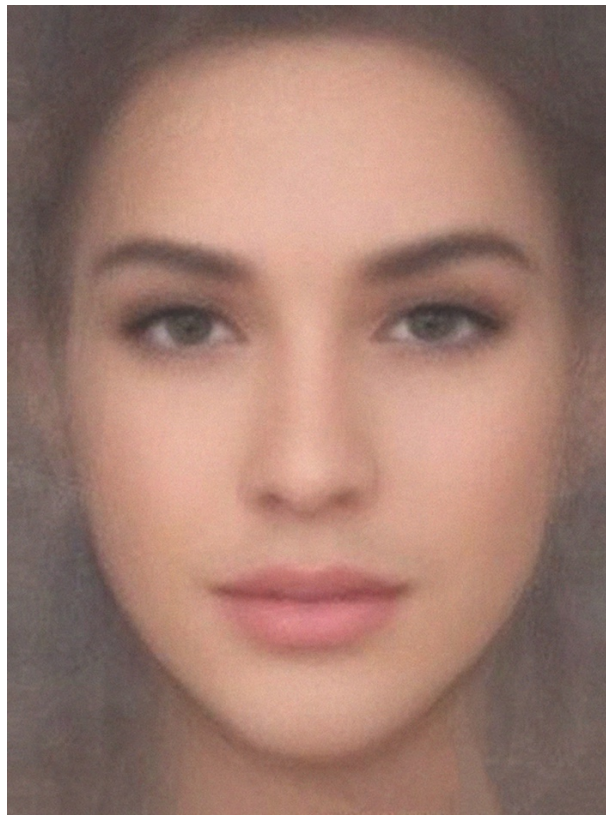


Figure 1. Photo morph from PAPER Magazine (Gillespie and Rapp 2019).

In the context of digital media and influencer culture, social media creators most likely to rise to the top are those from a privileged background in terms of race, class, and look (Duffy 2017; Bishop 2018a). In 2019, PAPER Magazine published a visual composite of what the “ideal” influencer would look like based on images from Instagram’s top 100 most followed influencer accounts (Gillespie and Rapp 2019). The resulting photo morph [Figure 1] was a

ghostly image featuring the face of a young white woman aligned with dominant Eurocentric beauty ideals: almond eyes, button nose, heart-shaped face, thin lip, and fair skin. As creator culture scholar Sophie Bishop (2021b) points out, “non-risky influencers — who are hired more frequently, and paid more — tend to be white, beautiful, heterosexual with long-term boyfriends. Later, they become mommy bloggers.” Influencers’ visibility and their ability to convert fame into monetary rewards are further intertwined with a range of technological and industrial practices, from the biased design of social media algorithms (Bishop 2018b; Duffy and Meisner 2023) and influencer management tools (Bishop 2021a) to neoliberal brand culture’s practices of performative diversity (Banet-Weiser 2012; Banet-Weiser and Glatt 2023) and racial inequality in influencer compensation (Christin and Lu 2023). All the individuals who represent the key case studies in this dissertation are woman-identifying, and most are influencers of color or, as with virtual examples, constructed as such. In other words, I am working with a set of fashion and beauty lifestyle influencers that reflect the tension between the hypervisibility of racialized bodies on screen as commodity and fulfillments of diversity quota, on the one hand, and the limited visibility of racial subjectivities, on the other. Instead of focusing on influencers from a single racial or ethnic background, I select a range of influencers that are racialized differently in this project. The intention is to shed lights on different racializing and gendering logics undergirding technological and industrial practices of digital cultural production by discussing spectralized forms of labor that are often gendered, racialized, and classed.

Methodology

This dissertation contains close analysis of several case studies, dissecting the surface of influencer media from its aesthetic language to its rhetorical framing. These are what media and

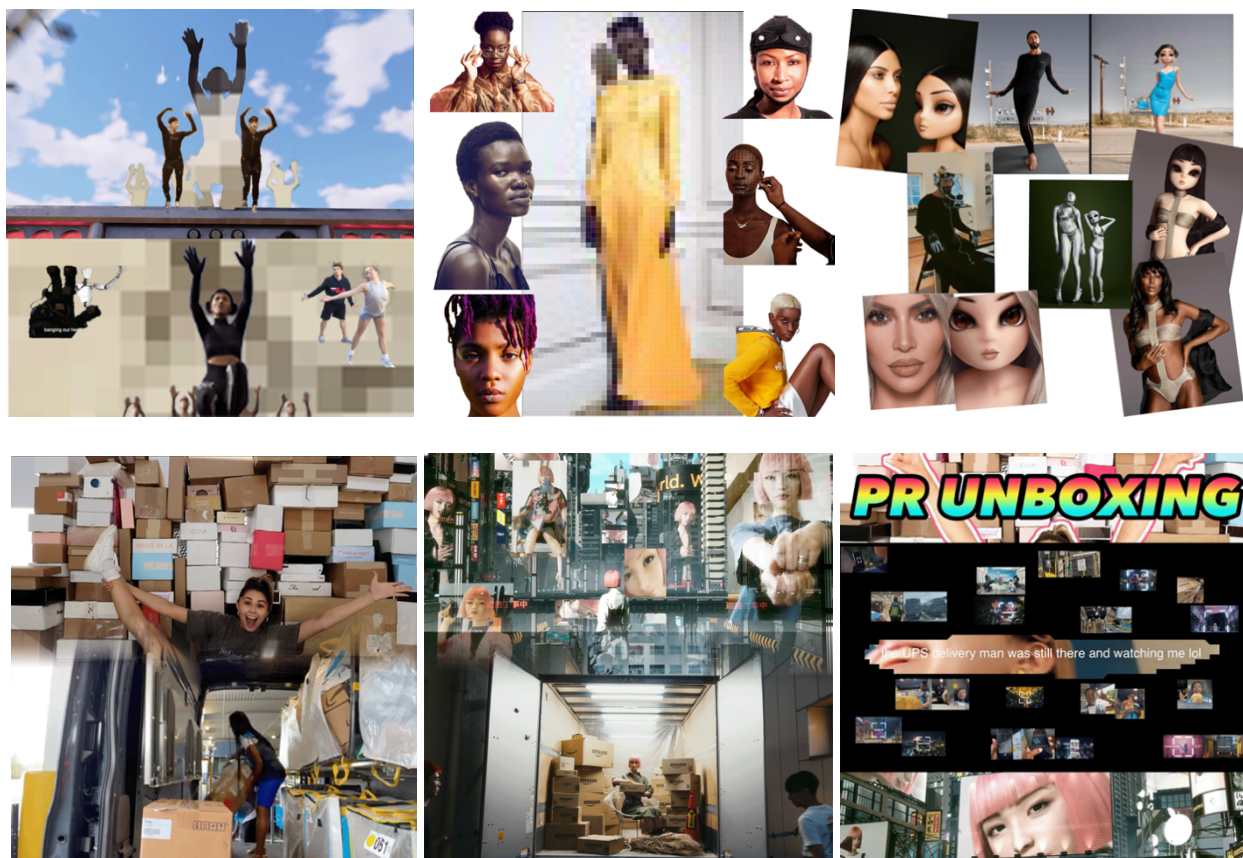
communication studies conventionally terms “textual analysis” or “discourse analysis.”

Influencer media texts are racialized and gendered interfaces whereby the forms, practices, and logics of digital cultural production and e-commerce operation become obfuscated. I engage with these media texts in relation to socio-cultural practices to make visible the contours of the circuits of production-distribution-consumption-production and the processes through which certain relationships take place (Hall 1980). Crucial to these close reading of surface images is the adoption of a spectral vision to find material traces left by ghost workers of the influencer ecosystem within the media text itself. Moments of detour taken by creators themselves, whether intentionally to construct authenticity or not, often allow certain hidden demands and encounters to seep through for viewers. Critical engagements with surface images and their ruptures challenge the common assumption of the visual as the obvious or the superficial. They become sites of encounter to reveal structuring absences within influencer media and the material traces left by spectralized forms of labor.

However, the core of this dissertation’s work of critique lies not only at the act of reading these banal images, but also by making connections between different images and types of labor not often analyzed in relation to each other. I arrive at many of my arguments through active juxtaposition: 1) widely circulated surface images against each other, and with shadowed images buried in industry texts; 2) industrial discourse and the ground-level material realities of production, and 3) different spectralized forms of labor across sites of encounter. This dissertation thus uses visual, textual, and structural juxtapositions to assemble the obscured operation of relational materiality beneath the highly performative images and rhetoric in this age of spectacle and simulacrum. Since identities (e.g., race and gender) and physical goods are both consistently rendered into visual and rhetorical commodities as merely screen-deep,

juxtaposition—natural or forced—become a means to discover material traces and relational assemblages, unpack production practices and logics, and develop deeper structural critiques. Furthermore, juxtaposition is not simply an analytical method of processing visual and discursive data, but also a critical-creative method to generate new images that experiment with the spectrality of labor in influencer ecosystems and offer new insights on the gap between the surface and the structure.

In addition to content analysis, collage-making can be a powerful and embodied means to qualitatively process visual data, especially who the data or image is attached to and what this data or image does not tell you (Cowan and Rault 2020). Processing influencer images by creating processual collages allows for a closer look at the presence and absence in these images, and further make sense of key visual data within and across case studies throughout my research. The process of collage-making also elicits other elusive connections and discoveries of overlooked traces of labor. Figures 2a-f are a few artifacts I created during research based on influencer texts analyzed throughout this project to process different aspects of the dissertation. These rusty digital collages—aiming to re-create visuals and meanings through relational techniques such as juxtaposition and superimposition—operate as a theorization process accompanied by creative making. These processual collages mobilize digital collecting and remixing as methods of information gathering and relation formation. Piecing together highly stylized and meticulously constructed images of influencer culture with varying obscured moments and sites of (im)material operation under the same visual field guided me, I simultaneously engage these different aspects and think through their connections in an attempt to make sense of the imagery.



Figures 2a-f. Samples of processual collages I created throughout the research process.

In essence, this dissertation adopts collage practices of remixing materials from different texts and sites into a single composition to generate new, situated insights regarding aesthetics, rhetoric, labor, and operating logics. Collage constructs a space of encounters that brings disparate ideas, concepts, and phenomena into conversation with one another (Cran 2014). A collage-inspired is particularly well suited to a complex topic like the influencer ecosystem, which encompasses industries from social media content creation to visual effects production, e-commerce logistics, home management, and more. Actively constructing an in-between space through collage-making allows for unexpected connections and reveals material realities of spectralized forms of labor. Additionally, to formally include my processing images here is to carve out a space for informal practices of digital collecting, drafting, and crafting as research methods. Many of these forms (e.g., mood boards and scrapbooks) have been traditionally

associated with femininity and the domestic, and as such have been thought of as informal, “low” art. The methodology section thus doubles as a space to explore feminist interventions in embodied processes and formats through collage as a processing method and a relational approach toward inquiry and knowledge production.

The process of collaging consists of layering not only different media sources, but also different theoretical, analytical, and situational forms of knowledge. This literal and metaphorical application of collaging is manifested throughout this dissertation. Chapter 1 resulted from juxtaposing the glamorous images of three virtual influencers with the material realities of behind-the-scenes technical production, as well as unpacking the rhetorical priorities, visual designs, and racial dynamics among these three avatars. Chapter 2 brings together images and rhetoric from three vastly different e-commerce influencer media genres and sites of laboring to reveal the tacit relational material connections between them, which I see as representative of the broader industrial and labor relations across digital cultural production, e-commerce retailer marketing, and last-mile delivery. Chapter 3 examines two popular closet decluttering videos on YouTube in relation to Marie Kondo’s self-help media and home management theory to understand digital cultural production’s mobilization of different forms of gendered labor, as well as YouTube videos by thrift shop employees and independent secondhand resellers, both of which capture the aftermath of decluttering. This collaging drew out varying kinds of tidying labor and the managerial logics nested in and around the production of closet decluttering videos. If each chapter on its own signals acts of critical collage, the dissertation goes a step further by juxtaposing these three inquiries to illustrate a chain of (im)material precarious labor as unrecognized work extracted from digital creative workers and the undergig workers in influencer cultural production and e-commerce economy.

Despite what the naming of the influencer ecosystem might suggest, the goal of this project is not to totalize capitalism-driven media, digital, and business structures. Instead, the spectral approach of closely reading “obvious” materials against the grain, of finding fictions and threads, and of juxtaposing the (un)expected across time-space, becomes a relational materialist method to critique capitalism from within. This dissertation is a feminist study of digital media not only because of the feminized nature of fashion and beauty lifestyle influencer media culture and economy. In addition, I specifically adopt a feminist methodology of digital precarity (Precarity Lab 2019), which demands the attention to relational materiality between objects of analysis, as well as the nested difference and possibility across these linked sites of happening.

Chapter Organization

The organizational logic of this dissertation roughly traces the consumption cycle of (im)material commodity production, circulation, and discard in influencer cultural production and e-commerce operation: from the process of constructing virtual influencers as digital beings and strategic marketing tools, to mobilizing influencers and logistic workers in selling and delivering physical goods, to the post-consumption stage of managing and tidying up overflowing items. Juxtaposing these three sites of value production and labor extraction carves out a relational space to excavate and assemble different forms of undervalued labor and infrastructure.

Chapter 1 looks at the production of virtual influencers or computer-generated influencers, popular social media-native personas supposedly with no offline referent. They are prominent in the realm of digital transmedia storytelling and social media marketing, often strategically constructed as racialized young women to facilitate the marketing of different

brands. Despite the rhetorical emphasis on these avatars' immateriality, behind-the-scenes industry materials reveal the dependence on a material network of real-life below-the-line media production workers in the visual effects industry (e.g., motion capture actors and technicians) as infrastructural laborers.¹⁶ My study encompasses three case studies: queer mixed-race Brazilian American fashion icon and pop musician Lil Miquela, Black African British digital supermodel Shudu, and the light skinned, Manga-esque fashionista and singer Noonnoouri. Their constructions demonstrate how highly marketable and completely controllable fembots are transformed into virtual humans on social media platforms. Meanwhile, already precarious human laborers are increasingly disconnected from their own work and are essentially becoming robotic and spectralized. I further situate the dematerialization of labor in relation to race-making and virtual identity constructions through the production and packaging of the three avatars. Each represents a distinct racial project that influences the concurrent processes of racialization and racial erasure. These practices are contextualized in broader economic markets that govern the logics of digital cultural production. Through juxtaposing virtual influencers with technical processes, this chapter highlights the rhetorical and technological production of digital racial embodiments, including the dematerialization and (de)racialization of influencer production labor.

Chapter 2 confronts the rhetoric of seamlessness and the aesthetic of excess in sales-driven influencer cultural production, the pinnacle of a consumption-based economy that is predicated on the production, circulation, and consumption of (im)material commodities from images to physical goods. I turn to e-commerce advertisements featuring virtual influencers, PR

¹⁶ Visual effects, or VFX, represents a highly precarious sector in film and media production. Per Hye Jean Chung (2018), VFX workers generally suffer from low pay, long hours, and low job security. The global outsourcing of VFX work has further exacerbated this volatility.

unboxing haul videos by beauty influencers, and last-mile delivery worker vlogs by nano lifestyle influencers to expose various (un)expected forms of entanglement between beauty creators and logistical workers in the e-commerce-driven influencer economy. I particularly draw out the presence of delivery drivers, sometimes in plain sight yet persistently masked by the hypervisible, spectacularized visual of stacked (im)material boxes as a capitalist sign. My analysis starts with a brief rupture in a video wherein Japanese American beauty influencer Roxette Arisa Howe's filming is interrupted by a doorbell rung by a UPS driver delivering more boxes. This momentary overlap of content and logistical production becomes an entry point to further peel back spectralized layers of (im)material, (in)visible influencer labor. This chapter triangulates this instance with Amazon Fashion's portrayal of Japanese virtual influencer Imma as a package handler and Black American beauty microcelebrity Shanique Bella's self-documentation of her workday as an Amazon delivery driver. Weaving together analysis of these three media scenarios, I demonstrate how racialized and gendered bodies of influencers and/as logistical workers are mobilized as commodity, interface, labor, and infrastructure in the symbolic and material operations of influencer and e-commerce economy.

Chapter 3 unpacks examples of (im)material digital labor that is essential to the production of closet decluttering videos on YouTube inspired by Japanese tidying guru Marie Kondo. Premised upon the physical process and result of tidying up one's wardrobe and home, this genre provides a venue to interrogate the layered operation and exploitation of (im)material labor in both domestic and public spheres. Through analysis of two primary case studies by white American lifestyle influencer Leighannsays and Asian American sustainable fashion influencer Bestdressed (along with a range of paratextual materials), I highlight three interconnected yet spectralized forms of often feminized and/or racialized tidying labor

mobilized for the production of closet decluttering videos: home, content, and waste management. I start by analyzing the process of decluttering as shaped by the gendered history of housework, self-performance, and the maintenance of a domestic relationship. What follows is an examination of the work of managing (im)material data as influencers organize closets, produce digital content, and promote their digital selves. The chapter ends with an investigation of the labor of waste management during and after the act of decluttering, in and outside of home. This chapter reveals the imbricated feminization and racialization of influencer labor, as well as the managerial logics from home-based cultural production to treatment of the decluttered. Juxtaposing the two case studies with paratexts unearths the complexity of layered digital (im)material labor necessitated by closet decluttering videos as social media content in the convergence of lifestyle media, self-help industry, throwaway culture, and influencer economy.

Last but not least, I use the concluding chapter to flesh out 1) key throughlines and takeaways across the three body chapters around spectralized forms of labor and social relations, and 2) speculate on future research directions in the study of influencer ecosystems.

CHAPTER 1 Constructing the “Ideal” Diverse Avatar: Proxy Labors and Gendered, Racialized Bodies in Virtual Influencer Production¹⁷

In February 2018, while scrolling through Instagram stories, I stumbled upon the virtual influencer Miquela (@lilmiquela) by chance. As a fashion aficionado, I eagerly anticipated indulging in recorded footage from the Prada Fall 2018 show. However, I was greeted with a few pre-show Instagram takeover stories¹⁸ featuring an intriguing avatar-like figure named Lil Miquela, who was dressed and styled in a video game-inspired aesthetic. I was immediately captivated by it and proceeded to browse through the associated Instagram account. Miquela made her debut on Instagram in April 2016, when she was introduced as a teenage Latina called Miquela Sousa from Downey, California. Her Instagram profile mirrors that of many other streetwear enthusiasts who have a passion for music and work as models. Miquela shares images of her attire and candid pictures either by herself or in the company of friends. She regularly partners with fashion and beauty firms, is featured in magazines, and actively supports social justice causes on her social media channels.

On April 19, 2018, one day after her account was “hacked” by another avatar Instagrammer Bermuda (@bermudaisbae), Miquela posted a provocative Instagram post that marked a crucial turn in her narrative: she became aware of her non-human identity. Per her origin story, she was originally an android developed by Cain Intelligence to be a servant. Brud,

¹⁷ Portions of this chapter were published in *Flow* as a short column titled “Shudu and Her ‘Muses’: Stand-in Labor in Virtual Influencer Production” (2023) and *Velvet Light Trap* as a referred journal article titled “Standing In as a Famed, Diverse Virtual Influencer: Proxy Labor and Identity Construction in Computer-Generated Influencer Production” (forthcoming).

¹⁸ An Instagram takeover is when an Instagram account collaborates with someone to temporarily take over the account to post original content. This guest is typically an influencer, a celebrity, or an employee of the business. The guest host tends to announce themselves to the audience and proceed to post updates throughout the specified duration time, from a few hours to a few days. Three common Instagram takeover categories include Instagram posts takeover, Instagram stories takeover, and live video takeover.

the current company behind her, intervened and rescued her from her condition of captivity, subsequently reprogramming her to adopt the persona of Miquela Sousa. The scripted hacking and exposé drama endowed her with human-like qualities and showcased her ability to articulate emotions and distress derived from her past and present encounters. Miquela asked: “I’m not a human, but am I still a person?” She struggled to comprehend the reality of her robotic nature at first, particularly when she felt very human and displayed a range of emotions such as crying, laughing, dreaming, falling in love, feeling upset and afraid, and getting hurt.

Science fiction media often make a connection between robots and past occurrences of subjugation and marginalization (Rhee 2018). Miquela's narrative design is influenced by this legacy, and her portrayal as a brown fembot alludes to the afterlives of slavery and the historical presence of racism, particularly in the way women of color have been dehumanized in and as technologies. The shift in her position, from being a servant at Cain Intelligence to becoming a virtual influencer at Brud, highlights the ongoing perpetuation of racial and gender-based oppression through technological means. This transition represents a shift, from physical and reproductive confinement to the extraction of labor and resources through technology, experienced by women of color. Miquela was crafted to be ambivalent about, and even critical of the creation of her identities in this phase of existential crisis: being Brown and being a woman are options made by a corporation; her identity as a woman of color was chosen by Brud, aiming at attracting the attention of marketers and venture capitalists within the context of neoliberal multiculturalisms. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2019, 96–97) states, “Commercial multiculturalism assumes that if the diversity of individuals from different communities is best recognized in the marketplace, then the problems of cultural difference will be (dis)solved through private consumption, without any need for a redistribution of power and resources.

Corporate multiculturalism (public or private) seeks to ‘manage’ minority cultural differences in the interests of the center.”

It is worth noting that Brud brands itself as a diverse company co-founded by a Black man and a Latinx woman. Despite being created by creators from underrepresented groups and their advocacy for social justice, Miquela—as a symbolized cultural good for digital media consumption—continues the operation of commodification to exploit labor and differences while reinforcing tropes and racial logics in processes of material and symbolic production. The destabilizing phase of robot/human identity crisis experienced by Miquela was both a captivating event of internet gossip and a complex reflection on the limits of her creation. This push and pull reveals a glimpse of how the enabling/constraining dynamic of capitalism can manifest in cultural production as a complex site of struggle. Creators of color at Brud, like many minoritized cultural producers, have internalized what race and media scholar Anamik Saha (2018) calls “the racializing/rationalizing logic of capital” in the process of industrial cultural production through technologies of rationalization. Rationalization, in this context, refers to the standardized procedures and practices that cultural industries adopt to mitigate uncertainty (Ryan 1991; Saha 2018). Creative decisions behind cultural commodities like virtual influencer Lil Miquela is governed by common business sense or industry lore that condition seemingly neutral risk-averse industrial practices in production and marketing that have significant racial implications.

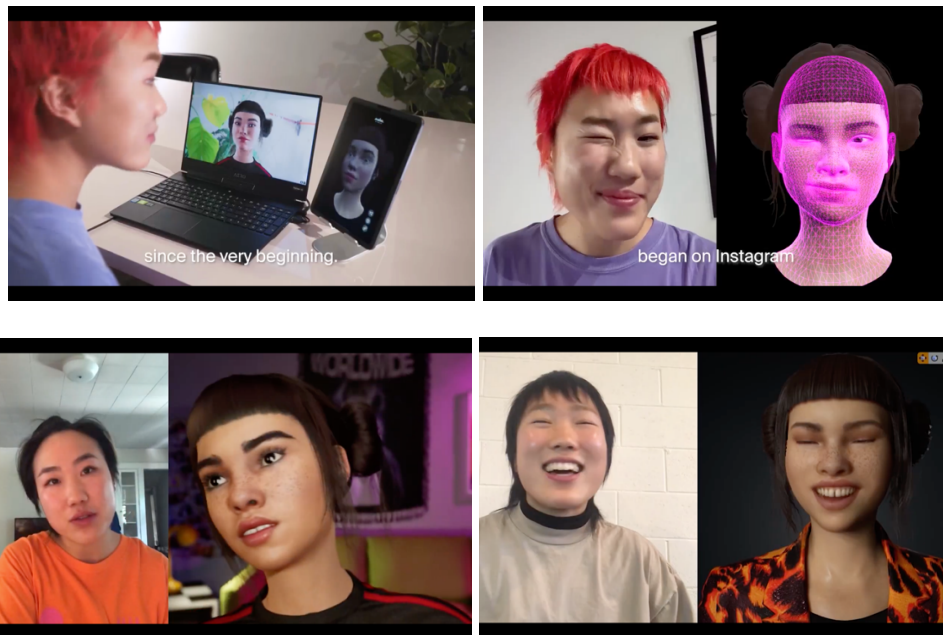
When creating hyperrealistic human-like virtual figures, creators mimic lifelike postures and motions to enhance the character’s liveliness by using a combination of digital rotoscoping and compositing, three-dimensional (3D) computer-generated imagery (CGI), and high-end motion capture (mocap) technology (Sutherland 2023). Digital rotoscoping updates the early

animation technique rotoscoping by using computer-aided technologies to trace the body and movement of the body double to produce realistic imageries. The face of the virtual character is created using 3D CGI. Technicians then combines separate source images with the rotoscoped and computer-generated (CG) images to create the final image of a virtual influencer composited over the stand-in performer. Hyperrealist human-looking virtual influencer production also frequently incorporate high-end mocap in addition to 3D CGI and digital compositing, which involves recording the movements of physical objects or people and digitally recreating them on a virtual design. Virtual influencer production is part of the broader visual cultural production whose virtual production pipelines heavily mobilize a precarious creative workforce to digitally create and composite multiple layers of images to merge the real and the virtual (Chung 2018).¹⁹

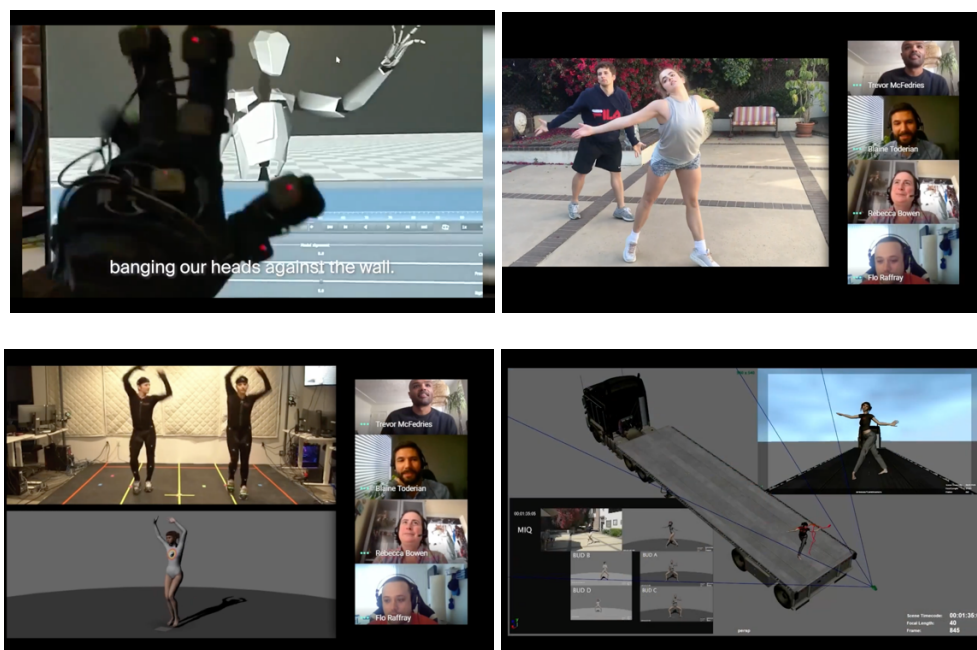
In order to animate Miquela and maintain her captivating presence as a fascinating virtual human, a concealed network of behind-the-scenes laborers is mobilized. Although Brud is widely known for being secretive about the production process of their digital characters, B-roll footage in promotional videos inform us of how digital 3D technologies are incorporated in the production of Miquela. In one scenario [Figures 3a-d], Brud's realtime technical director, an individual of Asian descent, was showcasing the instant mapping of their facial expressions onto Miquela's face (Brud 2021; Brud 2022b). In another scenario [Figures 4a-d], Miquela's dance in the music video "Hard Feeling" was created from pre-recorded performances by two white-presenting, unidentified real-life dancers in full body mocap suits (Brud 2021; Brud 2022a). All these images are part of the B-roll footage added to supplement the voice-over, which presents

¹⁹ Case studies I examine in this chapter are popular virtual influencers originated in the mid-to-late 2010s. None of these avatar figures were yet created using generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools. In other words, this chapter is a study of pre-AI virtual influencers that are generated by a range of digital 3D technologies, despite the fact that many of these creators tried to connect themselves to the buzz of AI. The project is pressing in light of the rising widespread application of generative AI in cultural production of different kinds.

the official marketing story of Miquela and Brud. In these promotional materials, chief creators become voices of Miquela as they discuss the conception, purpose, and overview of the creation context of the character. No explanation is provided regarding how these technologies are applied or the processes and labor involved. However, the technologies of digital embodiment,



Figures 3a-d. Screenshots from “The Venus NFT Series” (Brud 2021) and “Meet Brud: Playbook for the Future” (Brud 2022b).



Figures 4a-d. Screenshots from “The Venus NFT Series” (Brud 2021) and “Reintroducing Brud” (Brud 2022a).

the labor of effaced body doubles, and the undergirding racial dynamics leave on-screen residues that haunt viewers of these industry promotional materials. These traces encapsulate what Hye Jean Chung (2018, 31) terms as “spectral effects,” i.e., material seams of laboring bodies and industrial practices that are masked by dominant discourse of digital technologies but still managed to find a way to make themselves legible to those who employs a critical mode of perception attuned to ghostly traces in composited images and industry talks.

Here, I want to highlight the underlying logic behind Brud’s secrecy: to preserve the illusion of constructing a virtual being like Miquela as exercising a kind of creative possibility free from physical corporeality. To achieve this, it is imperative for the material efforts involved in physically embodying a virtual character and digitally modifying it, as well as the individuals performing this labor to remain hidden and inconspicuous. Hidden body doubles of Miquela perform what is called proxy labor or stand-in labor, “a form of labor aimed at producing someone else’s self” in the economy of authentic self-branding and self-outsourcing (Anteby and Occhiuto 2020, 1288). By creating and attributing human-like qualities to Miquela as a cyborg, the act paradoxically devalues the work of real human workers, who are reduced to becoming mere substitutes or inferior counterparts. The construction of Miquela serves as a prime example of the current digital economy: a marketable and controllable robot is transformed into a virtual human on social media platforms, while already precarious humans are further alienated from their own labor, effectively becoming robotic. Virtual influencers are popular social media-native personas that are not only believed to have no real-life counterpart but also intentionally designed as young women with specific racial backgrounds to enhance brand marketing efforts. They prominently represent cultural imaginaries of fembots and virtual humans in the realm of digital transmedia storytelling and social media marketing. This chapter explores the rhetorical

and technological development of these virtual beings and inquires about the motivations and efforts that led to their creation. What are the material consequences of building and sustaining these popular virtual influencers? Whose labor and physical existence are erased in order achieve the mystic fame of these virtual avatars? Who experiences dehumanization during the process of humanizing these virtual characters? And who ultimately benefits from these dynamics?

I perceive these virtual influencers as ideal avatars that propose the idea of a universal virtual humanity as a technologically advanced future for creative work that goes beyond the constraints of physical bodies. These enchanted techno-characters are also associated with marketers' aims to exert greater control over the influencers they collaborate with, while simultaneously addressing the recognized need for increased diversity on screen. Virtual influencers can thus be seen as exemplifying the concept of the "surrogate effect" (Atanasoski and Vora 2019, 15), as they are perceived as technological objects that substitute for humans. To brands and marketers, virtual influencers are replacements for human influencers, who are conveniently devoid of agency. For cyborg creators, virtual influencers might serve as proxies for their fantasies, manifestations of their alter egos, and tools for profit. Examining the technological and narrative production of virtual influencers in this chapter makes visible additional surrogate relationships. These seemingly magical virtual beings on social media are, in fact, reliant on a network of behind-the-scenes human laborers. This includes motion capture performers who provide their physical bodies and movements to these virtual characters, alongside voice actors and character writers who craft the voices and personalities of these digital avatars. This chapter aims to provide visibility for many of the individuals who perform proxy labor and are essential workers in the infrastructure of virtual influencer production. In

doing so, I reveal the ghostly effect of digital 3D technologies and the work of standing in as a spectralized form of labor in the process of creating digital avatars and synthetic identities.

The behind-the-scenes images of Miquela's making also exemplify a formalized group production practice of digital Blackface and Brownface, of using digital techniques to mimic and appropriate Black and Brown culture. Over the past decades, there has been a rise in instances of individuals engaging in practices of digital Blackface and Brownface online. This practice may be understood as part of the legacy of minstrelsy and the appropriation of Black and Brown cultures in the digital era. It typically involves using stolen profile pictures, inaccurate African American Vernacular English, employing Black GIFs, using dark skin tone emojis, and physical alterations. Blackfishing refers to a particular digital Blackface occurrence wherein a non-Black person pretends to Black online: these individuals, often social media influencers, assume a Black identity online by modifying their physical appearance through makeup and hair styling, self-tanning, and plastic surgery. Mocap's anonymity allows Brud to hire body doubles of various colors and ethnicities to embody a cool, authentic-seeming, mixed-race Latina persona based on Black and Brown digital youth cultures. The technological process of mocap extracts corporeal data from these bodies and fuses them with the design of Miquela through digital translations of physical movements. Miquela's images are carefully calibrated for consistency despite cross-racial and cross-ethnic casting of body doubles. Mocap's emphasis on transporting motion data from the proxy's body feeds into a post-racial²⁰ configuration of diverse representation and the proposal of a universal virtual humanity that manifests a fundamental

²⁰ The pervasive narrative of the post-racial condition in the United States has been widely disseminated, especially since the historic 2008 election that resulted in Barack Obama the first Black president. Surface-level diversity in mass culture is frequently employed to affirm a façade of a multicultural society wherein racial differences become insignificant and racism becomes nonexistent. On the one hand, post-racial discourses obfuscate structural racism and attribute racial inequalities to individual choices. On the other hand, the post-racial ideology encourages people to perform race through individualized market consumption.

contradiction of capital in racial neoliberalism. Such underlying logic in Brud's production process demonstrates that the broader post-racial condition we are in, i.e., the existence of racism is denied – be it through the colorblindness discourse or the advancement of science and technology – while race continues to circulate, and differences are utilized to distinguish products in the oversaturated market as political theorist David Theo Goldberg describes in the seminal *Are We All Postracial Yet* (2015). Postraciality is an illusion that operates spectrally as it “blinds us to the racial, to racisms, their materializations and traces” (Goldberg 2015, 89); it conceals, or make racisms disappear. This is reflected in the deep naturalization of whiteness and the hypervisibility of racial characteristics in virtual influencer production while the conditions of producing the precarity of behind-the-scenes stand-in performers are ignored by the industry.

Later in this chapter, I will further unpack the construction of Miquela as a queer, mixed-race Brazilian American teenage girl who reflects the racialization of the cultural commodity: especially how her design as an “ideal” virtual influencer that enacts a specific racial project using complex systems of signification to transform race, ethnicity, and sexuality into sources of attention/profit. The second objective of this chapter is thus to examine the nuanced and sometimes contradictory dynamics involved in the production and packaging/marketing of racialized, gendered virtual influencers. How do virtual influencers come to be racialized? How does the virtual influencer production/industry construct race? How are cultural texts racialized at specific stages in the production and marketing processes? My research reveals the centrality of racialized and gendered workers in both the physical construction of virtual influencers as well as the narratives that are constructed around them. I explore these dimensions through three case studies: queer mixed-race Brazilian American fashion icon and pop musician Lil Miquela, Black African British digital supermodel Shudu, and the light skinned, Manga-esque fashionista

and singer Noonouri. These case studies implement mocap and custom digital alterations very differently, and in turn, each has produced varied material relationships as well as a specific combination of racialized and gendered dynamics. Juxtaposing the technical and rhetorical production of virtual influencers reveals two simultaneous processes: 1) the elimination of material and racialized labor from our comprehension of the production procedure, and 2) the heightened focus on deliberately crafted identity markers such as race and gender for these virtual bodies. In doing so, this chapter unpacks what accounts for such virtual constructions as racialized and gendered bodies, and asks what projects and interests are being advanced through them.

Upon examining the three avatars, it becomes evident that there are complex occurrences of digital Blackface and Brownface, white queer creators' erasure of race, commodification of diversity, and promotion of various racial ideologies. These practices are observed in relation to the constructed identities of the avatars, their chief creator, the workers involved in their production, and their sources of inspiration. Each avatar represents a distinct racial project that influences the concurrent processes of racialization and deracination within the framework of racial capitalism. Political theorist Cedric Robinson ([1983] 2000) terms "racial capitalism" to emphasize that the procedures of racialization and racism permeate across the social structures from the feudal society to the modern world system. The term is often deployed when discussing the histories and wakes of slavery, colonialism, genocide, the military industrial complex, and the prison industrial complex. Contemporary racial capitalism is not only practiced by the state; the extraction of social and economic value from the racial identity of others is widely practiced by industries, corporations, and individuals in this post-racial, neoliberal environment. The strategic designs of "diverse" virtual influencers are further situated in the broader and more

precarious conditions of industry and economic markets that perpetuate the racializing/rationalizing logics of capital in cultural media production (Saha 2018). This chapter thus examines the material and rhetorical work involved in digital racial embodiments, highlighting how infrastructural laborers in virtual influencer production are often hidden, dematerialized, and deracialized despite the proliferation of racialized virtual avatars. I argue that these representations in social media promotional culture and symbolic economy are created through cultural industrial practices that encapsulate prevailing hierarchical frameworks based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Proxy Labor in Technical Production

Before diving into proxy labor as a spectralized form of labor in the technical production of virtual influencers by thinking through body and voice doubles, I will briefly trace how spectrality has been considered in relation to audiovisual cultures and digital technologies. When thinking about virtual characters and digital environments, the uncanny effect is most discussed. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1963) describes the uncanny as something that is at once familiar and alien. The figure of the double is inherently uncanny and often gives people a sense of anxiety and a kind of ‘off’ feeling. Photographs and films, with their ability to produce mediated doubles of the reality, possess the uncanny quality. Authors of media and technologies like Roland Barthes (1981), Tom Gunning (2007), and Jeffrey Sconce (2000) have dealt with phantomic appearances in photography, cinema, and electronic media. Avatar influencers’ affinity with the digital environment taps into a kind of spectrality that is associated with the hyperreality and simulation in the cyberspace wherein phantom landscapes and synthetic identities are embraced. Robotics scientist Masahiro Mori (1970/2012) hypothesizes that

people's reactions to humanlike robots will descent into eeriness, or what is now known as "the uncanny valley." Highly anthropomorphic virtual influencers fall right in the center of discussions regarding whether these figures will be perceived in a more negative light due to the potential discomfort triggered by these almost-human images. It thus can be said that virtual influencers inherently possess a kind of ghostly presence and effect. However, I am thinking about spectrality quite differently in this chapter. Following the footsteps of Avery Gordon (2008) to take seriously the presence of ghosts, I look for spectral traces and structuring absences in our digital visual culture through the specifics of popular virtual influencer production to get closer to the complexity of social realities and labor conditions in the influencer ecosystem. I will first unpack spectralized forms of labor in the technical process of virtual influencer production in this section, before moving onto addressing spectralized logics and power dynamics in the strategic design of these popular racialized, gendered virtual influencers in the following section.

Although it is commonly assumed that virtual influencers are created virtually using 3D software, virtual influencer production relies on varying levels of physical production recorded from actuality along with digital manipulation of images and words. Noonooori's 3D starter pose assets,²¹ for example, resulted from a mocap session in which her creator stood in as the model doing different poses as her, followed by bi-directional adjustments in both 3D modeling software by digital technicians and physical modeling by the body double to perfect the digital presentation. In the case of Shudu, a character writer oversees her rhetorical profile like composing answers to interviewers' questions, creating personality and story, and crafting an

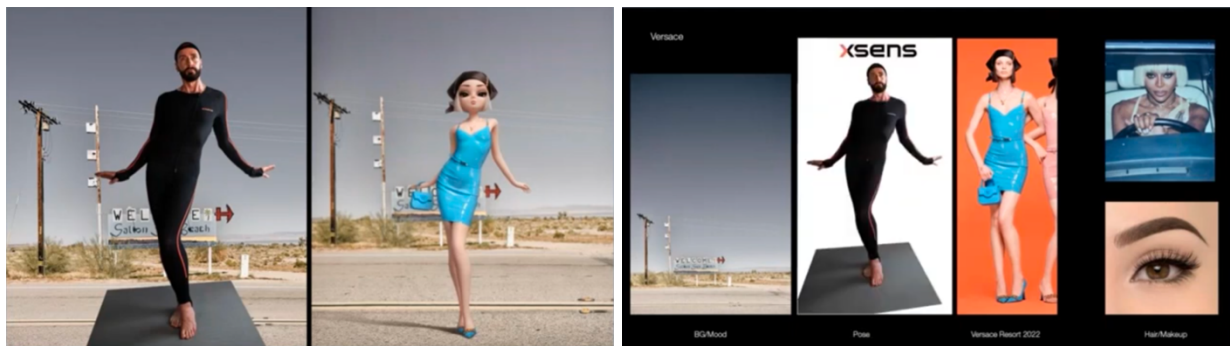
²¹ 3D starter assets are base contents or templates to get designers going in a 3D environment like Blender and Unreal. Pose assets are stored skeletal mesh poses that save the position of the mesh geometry and the skeleton data to be used to create a digital character. Noonooori's 3D starter pose assets refers to a library of key, common pose data specifically captured in a mocap session and digitally adjusted to fit the character design of Noonooori. These starter pose assets are used by 3D technicians as a starting point to create more unique images of Noonooori.

authentic voice consistent with Shudu's character.²² These are both examples of proxy labor, the work of producing someone else's supposedly authentic self in their place, or as their stand-ins. Proxy labor in CG influencer production refers to the spectralized form of labor performed by those who serve as a proxy in creating the body and voice of a virtual influencer. Both mocap performers and character writers tend to be precarious creative workers who face invisibility and job insecurity despite the fame that may be enjoyed by a virtual influencer. In the case of Lil Miquela (and more recently Noonnoouri), who is a singer that releases audiovisual content, there is the additional dimension of voice actors who lend their physical voice to the virtual influencer. In this section, I argue that mocap performers, character writers, and voice actors are crucial players in a hidden ensemble of overlooked creative workers, performing proxy labor in CG influencer production. A critical analysis of publicly available production materials of Noonnoouri and Shudu illustrate how the creation workflow of virtual influencers becomes the abstraction of material forms into digital data and the spectralization of labor.

Jorge Zuber, the creator of Noonnoouri, has admitted that the foundation of the avatar's digital 3D model is based off an actual person's physical corporeality and movements (L. deLisa Coleman 2018). Three months before the launch of this character, Zuber did a large-scale mocap session to test out nuances of varying movements and how well they work after the captured mesh geometry and skeleton data are transported to Noonnoouri's body in the 3D imaging and modeling software as Noonnoouri's starter pose assets (Xsens 2021). Zuber sees Noonnoouri as his alter ego and serves as the main proxy to produce her perceived corporeality. Mocap is also implemented in the regular workflow of the production and maintenance of Noonnoouri. As seen

²² It is interesting to note the similarity between virtual influencers and typical celebrities in the shared practice of having their social media accounts managed by someone else or a team.

in Figure 5a, the final image of Noonnoouri on the right is built from the left image in which Zuber is posing as if he is Noonnoouri. After obtaining the starter package needed for the production, Zuber transfers the data to 3D artists, who are responsible for substituting the character to create Noonnoouri's pose. They first check if Zuber's pose would match in the background before progressing to creating a technical asset that captures the uniqueness of the weight-shifted pose with one shoulder being slightly elevated while the other is slightly lowered



Figures 5a-b. Screenshots from Zuber's talk at Mocap Content Creators Conference hosted by XSENS in October 2021.

to demonstrate the strength and elegance of Noonnoouri. Figure 5b further demonstrates how the final CG image is a composition of many digital and physical referents being virtually merged and altered into something new. Most virtual influencers, however, do not have their chief creator as their physical body double. Instead, production teams hire stand-in performers, who are typically invisible to the general public and poorly compensated, like in the case of Miquela.

As Berryman et. al. (2021) suggests, virtual influencers are new but also situated in the lineage of virtual beings with celebrity status, including Hollywood synthespians or cyberstars (Creed 2000; Whissel 2010; Allison 2011), virtual idols in East Asia (Black 2006; 2008), game characters (Black 2001; Kluizenaar 2019), and virtual livestreamers or “vTubers” across video platforms (Kelts 2021; Tobin and Zhou 2022). I look to VTubers, i.e., 2D or 3D animated characters that inhabit livestreams on digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitch, and Bilibili), as a

popular alternative form of digital puppetry assisted by mocap technologies.²³ These VTubers' voice, mouth movements, and facial expressions are directly controlled by that of who are colloquially known as “the people inside” in Japan. “The people inside” are human body doubles who give the actual performance that are transposed onto the avatar characters on screen. Virtual livestreamers typically have real-time mocap software to track their facial movements using webcams and map the live dynamic data onto their 2D/3D avatars. Most professional VTubers in Japan and China are produced and managed by talent agencies. Unlike amateur virtual livestreamers who are often enthusiasts in charge of their own production process from character design to performance, professional VTubers are characters created by a designer, voiced by an actor, and managed by a talent agency. Issues surrounding working conditions have surfaced in recent years with more proxy performers behind high-profile virtual livestreamers quitting their jobs.²⁴ Agencies face criticism over talent mistreatment and the disposability of the actors behind (Faber 2021). Mental and physical health issues due to extremely long, demanding livestreaming hours and poor workplace treatment faced by real-life body and voice doubles are common complaints (Dean and Marinescu 2021). In early 2022, Carol from the top-tier Chinese 3D virtual idol group A-SOUL quit her job. Fans found the personal blog of Carol's proxy actor,

²³ VTubers started in Japan and are typically managed by talent companies. However, due to its rising global popularity and spread to different countries, the VTubers culture has attracted many types of creators. It is important to note that VTuber production typically only require lower end mocap technologies that are much more easily accessible, much less resource intensive compared to the creation of a 3D hyperreal humanlike virtual influencers. As a result, there exist more amateur, independent, do-it-yourself virtual livestreamers compared to virtual influencers. We thus have a lot more behind-the-scenes information regarding the production process and reports behind the laboring condition behind this mocap-assisted digital puppetry. The production workflow and condition of virtual livestreamers provide us additional insights into the production of virtual influencers.

²⁴ In 2020, Hololive Production announced VTuber Kagami Kira's retirement after a year and half because the real-life actor behind face deteriorating mental and physical health (hololive production 2020). In 2024, three VTuber talents managed by Wactor – Nemurine Charo, Himeragi Ageha, and Kobi Ururu – left the company due to a series of false contract and other illegal contract activities, plus continued psychological, physical, and sexual harassment towards them (Soyunapina12 2024; Khyo 2024).

who posted about workplace injuries from wearing the extremely heavy whole-body mocap suit while doing difficult singing and dancing performances for many hours (Chiyo 2022). Industry experts in China confirm that most mocap performers “are expected to actively power their respective avatar four to five hours per day, 22 days per month” (Tobin and Zhou 2022). Despite the long strenuous work, the average salary for these workers lies way below the Chinese median income. They receive only one percent from the actual capital earning of their livestream and earn approximately fifteen US cents per tip transaction regardless of the tip amount (Tuweiliu 2022). As a result, the commercial success of a virtual avatar does not correlate with better income and greater fame for its proxy laborers.

The same power dynamic continues in the production of virtual influencers, and the cultural industry writ large as avatars created by CG and generative AI technologies have become central to media industries like gaming, film, television, fashion, and the emerging metaverse marketing space. Although it might seem that CG avatars free creators from physical limitations, the production of virtual influencers is firmly grounded in human corporeality. Industry discourse around digital characters is rooted in the hierarchical mind-body division, prioritizing the physical freedom of the “chief” creator based upon the corporeal and emotional proxy labor of no-name creators whose work goes unnoticed and poorly compensated. Because the main attractions are the virtual characters’ facade but not the actors behind that facade, body doubles are widely seen as disposable. What studios value are the virtual characters themselves as talent, intellectual property, and monetary opportunity (Dean and Marinescu 2021). Mocap performers are treated as cheap, replaceable cogs who must use their bodies to sustain the constructed fantasy of virtual characters. Due to the hidden nature of their work, stand-in performers are further dehumanized, facing more precarity with fewer paths to have their rights

protected in the face of labor disputes (Chiyo 2022). In other words, the two-way dynamic of humanizing and dehumanizing labor co-constitutes the figure of the virtual influencer: it is not human but humanized because it is modeled on the human through the mocap-facilitated process of anthropomorphizing.

Furthermore, mocap as a technological medium that centers on the transference of original physical motion onto computer generated figures tends to de-emphasize the materiality of physical bodies in construction of limitless characters in the digital world. This can result in the race and labor of performers of color being erased and applied to white characters or characters of a different race as often seen in mocap applications in animated filmmaking. For example, Black tap dancer Savion Glover provided the essential, unique corporeal performance as the penguin Mumble in the 2006 animation *Happy Feet*, but his involvement was deemphasized in promotional materials to highlight the white actor Elijah Wood who *voiced* Mumble (Allison 2015). The (im)material digital processes of mocap erase markers of racial differences through digital decomposing and recomposing (Chang 2019), creating digital proxies through “porous materialization of data” (Mulvin 2021, 78). Because the mocap process decouples the proxy performer’s movements and poses from their bodies, the stand-in’s social identities such as race and gender may be conveniently disregarded. As described in the opening scenario, Miquela is an example of a virtual character constructed to display diverse identities with their poses and movements powered by real-life human proxies regardless of whether they share those identities. Mocap performers are treated simply as movement generators whose identities do not matter when, in fact, one’s social identity and cultural upbringing do shape how one moves.

The production of Shudu, a dark-skinned Black African British digital supermodel, encapsulates a different kind of power relation. Images of Shudu are created by white British fashion photographer Cameron James Wilson, using a combination of mocap, digital compositing, 3D modeling software Daz3D, Photoshop, and the garment simulation program Clo3D. She cannot be fully created in 3D since most fashion designers do not have available CG versions of these garments. As such, the production of images of Shudu modeling different fashion pieces often requires a photoshoot with a real model wearing the physical garment before



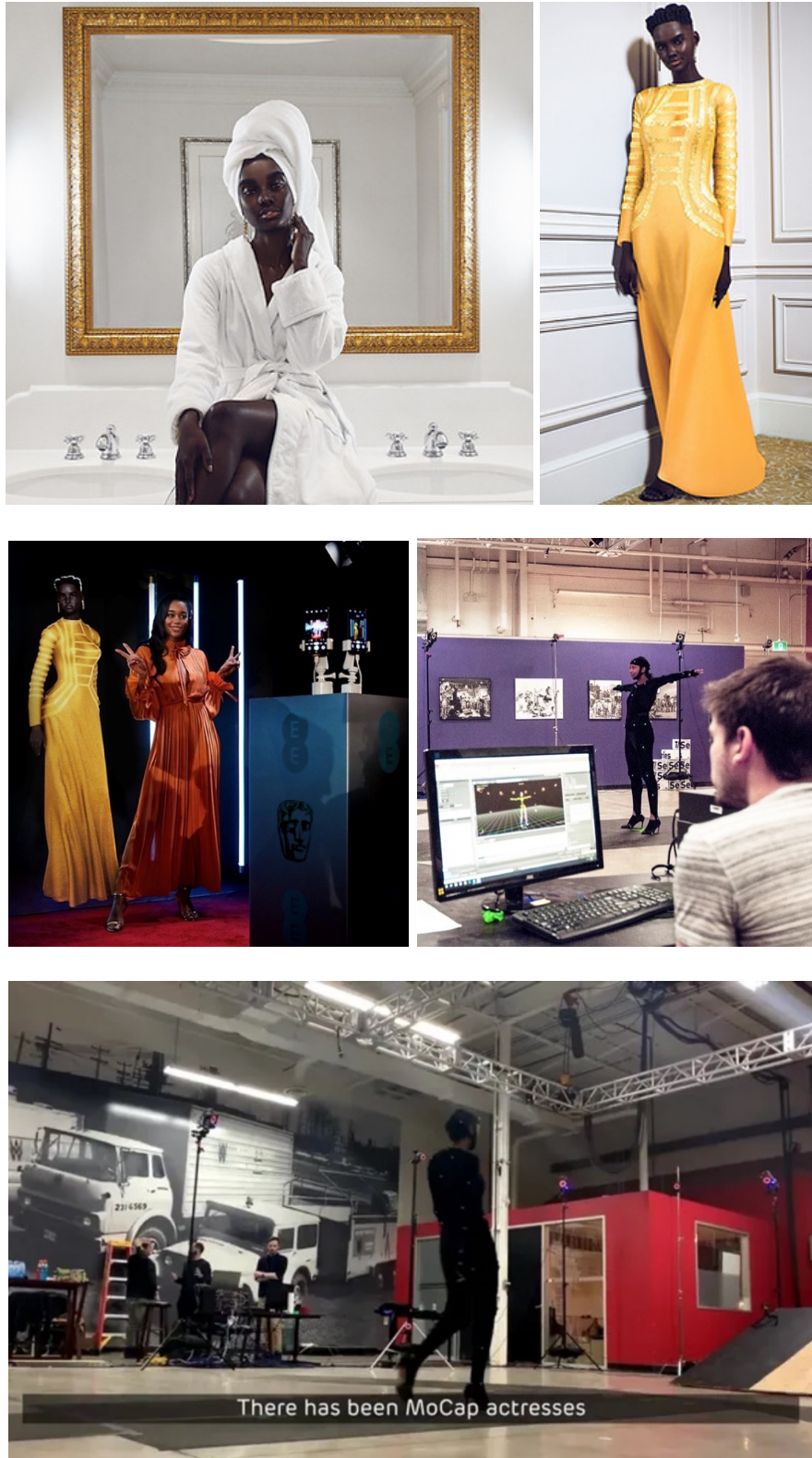
Figs 6a-b. An editorial photo of Shudu in Vogue Australia (left). A behind-the-scenes photo on The Diigitals website (right).

proceeding to merging the stand-in model with Shudu together in 3D environments (Kane, n.d.). Despite being conceptualized by a white man, the virtual production of Shudu as a Black female supermodel consistently employs real-life Black female models as Shudu's body doubles. Shudu's production company The Diigitals has a page that lists the proxy performers of Shudu, framed as "muses." London-based model Aleksandrah Gondora became the first Shudu "muse" as she substituted Shudu in an editorial shoot for *Vogue Australia* (Ama Badu [@noir.renaissance] 2020a; Gondora, n.d.). We learn from Gondora's write up and interview that

she physically embodied Shudu during the photoshoot. In Figure 6b, sensor markers are placed at specific points on Gondora's face during facial optical motion capture for better digital compositing of Shudu's face with Gondora's posing and movements in the final image like Figure 5a.

Shudu was also introduced as an interactive hologram at the 2019 British Academy of Film production through the use of two real-life models—Misty Bailey and Janice Drummond—performing as Shudu's proxies. Figures 7b-c, show two Shudus in her yellow gown at the get-ready hotel and the red-carpet photo booth respectively. Although looking identical, they are built on the corporeality of two different human performers. London-based Jamaican model Bailey modelled as Shudu getting ready at the Savoy Hotel six days before the event as seen in Figures 7a-b (Bailey, n.d.; Shudu [@shudu.gram] 2019). Toronto-based model Drummond performed as Shudu during a mocap session months before the event in collaboration with another company Quantum Capture to produce the real-time rendering of Shudu as a hologram (Drummond, n.d.; The Diigitals, n.d.). Holography assisted by high-end mocap and 3D CGI has been frequently used to digitally resurrect dead Black celebrities such as Tupac and Michael Jackson as holograms. Tonia Sutherland (2023) positions this phenomenon as rooted in the lineage of presenting Black bodies as commercial spectacle since the era of the Atlantic slavery.²⁵ She sees holographic technologies as “carceral technologies that work to create a spectacular prison: the dead are conscripted to a performative version of life for the visual pleasure and satisfaction of others. [...] This carceral conscription is one which spectacle goes hand-in-hand with the ghost of slavery and its uncanny dehumanizations” (Sutherland 2023, 98). To place a

²⁵ Sutherland draws out the parallel regarding the ways Black bodies are treated and presented between Holopac (hologram of Tupac) on the Coachella stage and the slave auction.



Figures 7a-e. The top two are Bailey stepping in as Shudu for the red carpet get-ready photos. The middle left is Shudu as a live hologram at the event. The middle right and the bottom are images of Drummond standing in as Shudu in the mocap session.

hologram of a Black woman virtual influencer on a red carpet for the photo booth continues this practice of Black spectacle, of putting Black bodies on display to be objectified. It is hard to miss the hologram Shudu as a particularly spectacular existence: this dark-skinned Black digital supermodel, already created as a spectacle or commodifiable fragment in the social media attention economy [Figures 7a-b], is furthered commodified as a holographic figure and a photo-op background for the wealthy, predominantly white film award show attendees [Figure 6c]. Moreover, if the hologram of a resurrected celebrity is an uncanny double of the original figure who has passed, the Shudu hologram interesting is a ghostly double of Shudu, a virtual influencer who is supposedly without offline referents. Of course, we have already learnt that CG avatar influencers are materially built upon data extracted from their spectralized body doubles. In Figures 7d-e, for instance, we see that Drummond is wearing a whole-body mocap suit so that her poses and movements can be captured and manipulated by technicians to pair with Shudu's 3D model assets. In other words, not only is the hologram Shudu a ghostly presence that serves commercial interests and fetishism, the production of both Shudu the digital supermodel and the hologram Shudu are haunted by the spectralized labor of stand-in performers who lend their Black flesh to the creation of commercial spectacles.

Shudu's white male creator Wilson emphasizes how he collaborates with Black women as Shudu. Each of them is credited as Shudu's "muse" on the studio website with an introduction page detailing their backstory, how they got involved in the production of Shudu, and their opinions on the digital model industry. Bailey [Figures 7a-b] and Gondora [Figures 6a-b] are two models with long-term working relationship with The Diigitals, frequently standing in as Shudu in photoshoots. On the one hand, these pages officially acknowledge the name and work of these Black women as contributors to the viral success of Shudu. On the other hand, these written

narratives on these women's pages are also marketing rhetoric being used to establish the image and reputation of The Diigitals as a company and Shudu as its creative product. In an IGTV interview, Gondora shared how Black models have consistently struggled in the modeling industry, and agencies mistreat Black models despite performatively supporting Black Lives Matter on social media (Ama Badu [@noir.renaissance] 2020a). Her biggest projects thus far are not obtained through her agency but the ones with Wilson and the additional opportunities she gets through modeling as Shudu. Gondora additionally emphasizes that Wilson always works with Black women in shoots for Shudu to ensure that the offers and deals he gains through Shudu materially benefit Black models in the fashion and modeling industries. Bailey echoes the same sentiment on how Shudu can provide more opportunities for Black models at standard commercial rates (Kane, n.d.; Ama Badu [@noir.renaissance] 2020b).

In comparison to Miquela, Shudu exemplifies how the fame of a CG influencer with a marginalized identity can be leveraged to materially benefit real-life models, writers, and other creative workers with those identities. However, the Black women who perform proxy labor as Shudu are also made visible as part of the studio's public relations strategy. The featuring of self-theorized accounts of creative workers on official channels turns them into an important part of the production company's publicity apparatus. These insights about Shudu's production process from the participants themselves help feed into the marketing of Shudu and her audience's overall fascination with digital technologies and creative cultural production. Their accounts of how Shudu has positively benefited their career as precarious creative workers are important materials to not only publicize the social impact of Shudu's production but also to help defend Shudu and her white male chief creator from critiques surrounding her creation. The criticisms are voiced mostly by Black women and women of color around the problematics of a white man

imagining and creating an unrealistic, highly racialized and profitable CG influencer (Jackson 2018), and how Shudu is facilitating the system that commodifies, consumes, and exploits Black women (Sobande 2021). These narratives by Shudu's Black female proxy workers are thus mobilized as the white male creator's defense against legitimate concerns about his project.

Furthermore, the rhetoric of labelling these Black women as “muses” instead of Shudu's proxy creators while hailing the white man as Shudu's chief creator reinforces existing racialized, gendered hierarchies in the creative industries and cultural production (Product Innovation 2019; Travers 2020). Muses originate from the Greek mythology as goddesses, beautiful young women who serve as inspiration for artists working in specific creative endeavors such as music, dance or theater. Historically, the figure of the muse developed into a frequent role and practice across artistic activities, including fashion design and photography. It is often understood as a passive figure with the role to inspire the artist to create. By invoking the rhetoric of “muses” when introducing the Black women proxy workers of Shudu, The Diigitals asserts Wilson as the mastermind creator. Instead of more accurately describing them as Shudu's stand-in performers who work to materialize Shudu, the usage of the term “muses” diminishes these Black women's performance of foundational work to simply being there to inspire. The layers of Shudu as a Black digital model conceptualized by a white man but materialized by the corporeality of Black stand-in models through the mediation of digital 3D technologies point to a clear racialized, gendered power dynamic. This relationship connotes larger symbolic relationships that are often dualistic and hierarchical, particularly considering the asymmetrical power dynamic between a white male artist and a Black digital model that is conditioned by colonial gazes, gendered dynamics, and artist-model power imbalances: white men as the mind, the artist, and the creator; women of color as the body, the muse, and the product.

Miquela, Noonouri, and Shudu are designed not just as three digital characters with visual appeal, they also speak to their audiences through texts and sounds. Just like the previously discussed CG image production, this section demonstrates that the production of virtual voices for these avatars demand often precarious and hidden proxy labor from character writers and voice performers. All three virtual influencers primarily communicate with followers through their social media posts, mainly via still or moving images along with captions. All three production teams need to devote significant attention to character development and calibrate an authentic voice for each CG avatar throughout their social media content and interviews.

In 2019, Ama Badu was hired as Shudu's writer to co-create key aspects of the virtual influencer by composing answers to interviewers' questions as Shudu, creating her personality and story, and crafting an authentic voice consistent with Shudu's character (Badu, n.d.; Ama Badu [@noir.renaissance] 2019a). Badu was hired as a result of public criticism of Shudu once it was revealed that this highly regarded dark-skinned Black digital model was created by a white man. As a dark-skinned Black woman, Badu is tasked with contextualizing Shudu and shaping how the avatar is discussed in public discourse. In a Harper Bazaar interview, Badu writes up a long answer as Shudu that offers a nuanced discussion of style, creativity, influencer cultures, and the ethics of fashion industries and representation (Phillips 2019). In an interview with the BBC, Badu appears on screen as a behind-the-scenes creator, redirecting public attention from the controversies of Shudu to issues faced by Black female models and asks for ways that this might change (Ama Badu [@noir.renaissance] 2019b). Long Instagram captions with a voice and personality are posted with Badu credited as the writer, or "Voice of Shudu" (Shudu [@shudu.gram] 2023c; 2023b; 2023a). Badu's position captures the fundamental tension

between agency and structure that is felt acutely by marginalized workers across cultural industries as discussed by many cultural studies of production.

Both Miquela and Noonnoouri are also virtual singers, releasing songs and music videos that showcase their vocals. In both cases, their music is the result of group creative musical practices by human musicians as demonstrated in available music production credits and behind-the-scenes videos. The remaining mystery is the vocalists listed as Miquela and Noonnoouri themselves. There are two main categories of virtual voices: genetic and gennematic. Genetic voices refer to those manufactured through an apparatus that creates voices based on human anatomy, whereas gennematic voices are synthetic sounds with no reference to human anatomy (Scha 1992). Most virtual bands and singers are genetic creations with their virtual voices generated from either the recordings of a living vocal artist or a behind-the-scenes singer (Stark 2018, 115). Vocaloids like Hatsune Miku and Gumi are often considered gennematic creations since their vocal production is created and manifested entirely by computer software. Even then, sounds in each vocaloid's library are based on pre-recorded phonemes of a real-life voice performer in the digital character's vocal range with added electronic distortion (Stark 2018, 128). The voices that Vocaloid fans/producers manipulate and create through the vocaloid editing platform have a human referent. In other words, regardless of which types of virtual voice these virtual influencer-singers like Noonnoouri and Miquela have, their sounds result from the proxy labor of a real-life voice performer coupled with technological alterations.

What does it mean for virtual influencer-singers to disclose musicians who work on their music but hide the identity of proxy performers who provide the aural qualities of their voices? Although to retain the aura of secrecy can be part of the reason, I believe the choice to not credit stand-in voice performers is due to the devaluation of proxy labor as purely physical and not

creative. When thinking through body doubles, we discussed how mocap performers are generally treated as disposable and valued only for the data captured from their bodily movements to be digitally manipulated as CG avatars' poses and movements. The same logic applies in the case of voice doubles. Behind-the-scenes voice performers are reduced to mere vocal machines to physically provide recorded human vocal sounds as data to be then altered in creative ways to generate the voices for virtual characters. Proxy vocal or motion performers stand in as these digital avatars simply to be extracted, disposed, and erased. At best, their involvement is mentioned in one brief, vague line as in Noonnoouri's video: "And then a real singer sang the song. This was then the base for my original voice" (noonnoouri 2023). At worst, their involvement was not only kept secret but also not properly compensated, or unpaid in the case of the first real-life rapper behind the voice of virtual rapper FN Meka (Kyle the Hooligan [@kylethehooligan] 2022; Corry 2022; Minsker and Bloom 2022).

Noonnoouri recently released a series of behind-the-scenes videos regarding all the human efforts behind her virtual creation. In one of the videos, Noonnoouri shares the production process of her music in her tech voice while images of her were intercut with behind-the-scenes footage of a group of white male musicians working on creating her newly released single (noonnoouri 2023). Her speech heavily emphasizes musical artistry from human instrumentalists and lyricists, holding such aspects of musical work as the human soul or the creative essence of Noonnoouri. The foundation of Noonnoouri's vocal performance, i.e., her proxy singer, along with the usage of AI-assisted voice manipulation technology are only mentioned in passing with no specificity. Despite the fact that the proxy singer is also a real human, they are devalued in this narrative since their contribution is seen as not creative but merely a necessity for the mechanical production of a digital voice. In the move to humanize the digital character, creative work is thus

elevated at the expense of the standard exploitative practices of concealing dehumanizing technological work performed by humans. The latter is deemed as menial and automatic, and hence degraded from the human to the dehumanized. This dynamic additionally taps into the gendered mind-body hierarchy with male musicians as the creative human mind whereas the female digital avatar and her voice double are the robotic body. Noonooori is not the “voice for the voiceless,” as she claims, but a canvas for those who are already widely heard, under the guise of an activist rhetoric.

As a whole, this section discussed virtual influencers’ digital embodiment through examining the processes and politics of the technical production of virtual bodies and voices. The virtual body and voice of virtual influencers are created with layers of work and inspiration, some of which are openly discussed while others are buried and neglected. In particular, the base layer of virtual influencers’ physical and vocal manifestation are typically devalued and overlooked although they are foundational to the ontology of these characters. My research suggests that the building of virtual avatar influencers requires the disembodiment of their stand-in human doubles, separating the data generated by the latter’s bodies and movements from its material base. Bodily movement, after being manipulated by human technicians using motion capture, 3D modeling, digital compositing, and other digital effects, are combined with the digital skin design to become a part of virtual influencers’ “body.” All three case studies show how virtual influencer production in our current moment necessitates real-life humans – mocap performers, character writers, and voice actors – performing spectralized proxy labor to complete the (im)material work of creating the “authentic self” of a virtual character. This study of pre-AI virtual influencers is particularly important as media and cultural industries as a whole is moving toward the direction of using CG and generative AI actors in content creation.

The construction of Miquela demonstrates that the humanization of virtual avatars often requires the dehumanization of real-life human proxy creatives, erasing their existence and turning them into surrogate robots that are inferior to the ideal digital avatars. The selective disclosure of proxy labor in the cases of Noonnoouri and Shudu suggests that stand-in laborers are only given the platform of recognition if such practices bolster the packaging and marketing of that virtual influencer. The production analysis of these three case studies reveals nuanced differences in gendered and racial relations embedded in technologies of production, transformation, and manipulation. The production of “diverse” virtual influencers materially relies on actual human bodies to supply expression, posture, motion, and spatial data. These humans are actively hidden in some cases not only to distance virtual influencers from their implication in the extraction of material labor but also to minimize the risk associated with these stand-in performers’ identities being misaligned with the virtual influencers’ designed identities. In other cases, stand-in performers of virtual influencers are acknowledged in behind-the-scenes promotional materials to highlight the creativity, authenticity, and agency behind virtual influencer production. The technical production of Miquela mobilizes ghost work in a classic sense, outsourcing the hidden work of standing in to precarious creatives and provide little stability and support to shadowed workers of the supposedly all-virtual influencer. Shudu’s proxy performers are selectively foregrounded as promotions and defense shields, but these workers and their essential contributions remain spectral in the dominant discourse around Shudu. Noonnoouri’s production stands out in that her chief creator is her body double; nonetheless, the uncanniness of a virtual influencer seeps through the ghostly nature of imaging/prosthetic technologies, the reliance on working bodies in technical production, and the erasure of proxy labor in industry and popular discourse. In the remaining sections, I will further

analyze how Noonooori, Shudu, and Miquela are strategically packaged as racialized cultural commodities, and how differences function in the making of these avatars.

Strategic Designs of “Ideal” Diverse Avatars

“The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality”
(Haraway 1991, 150).

“It is impossible to transcend the politics of the prosthesis/signifier” (Nguyen
2003, 298).

Virtual influencers are ideal avatars designed to fulfill the fantasies of media/cultural producers to transcend physical corporeality and achieve personal trans-racial or trans-gender liberation, as well as the desires of brands to exert more control over influencers while meeting demands for on-screen diversity. Ideal, desirable, and marketable influencers are ones who abide by mainstream beauty standards and capitalist logics of operation: they are thin, young, beautiful, fun, “authentic,” “diverse,” flexible, customizable, controllable, low risk, and they work 24/7 without union representation. The racialized and gendered bodies of these virtual influencers can be seen as part of a design and marketing interface whereby diverse identity markers are performing the political work of signifying archetypes of ideal digital cultural workers and the desirable path of commodifying differences for capital accumulation (Sweeney and Villa-Nicholas 2022). In light of the prolific employment of marginalized identities in the design of virtual influencers, I analyze identity markers as a technology that engages with the system of representation and power (Coleman 2009; Chun 2009). How does race and its intersectionality with gender and sexuality function in virtual influencers like Noonooori, Shudu, and Miquela?

Mimi Thi Nguyen (2003) emphasizes the significance of studying the image, even when it lacks material references, as these symbolic representations are the material manifestation of

social relations. As such, this chapter examines *both* the “real” or the flesh (as discussed in the previous section) *and* the “prosthetic” or the image (which will be further explored in this section), as well as the interplay between these two dimensions as shaped by production and cultural contexts. This section explores “diverse” virtual influencers as neoliberal racial subjects or objects of the recognition of social difference, whose “difference is the source of brand value celebrated and marketed as diversity” (Gray 2013, 771). Race, gender, and sexuality are design choices that signify lifestyle politics and social visibility in brand cultures. In what follows, I attend to the intentional utilization of minority identities as a technocultural labor resource in the development of virtual influencers. These “diverse” CG avatars mark a shift in social media marketing: instead of depending on the visibility of internet (micro)celebrities with certain social identities, the safer option now is to build or collaborate with controllable digital characters whose virtual bodies are strategically marked by varying racial, gendered, sexual, and ability configurations of differences. What is the logic behind the design of the three case studies? What functions do their specific formations of visible difference serve? How are they related to both neoliberal capitalism and emancipatory politics?

Noonoouri: Digital Drag and Queer Erasure of Race

Noonoouri is designed as a cartoonish, 1.5 meter tall, ethnically ambiguous fashionista, and more recently, a virtual singer, who first appeared via social media in 2018 on Instagram. With 410K Instagram followers at the time of writing, Noonoouri “lives” in Paris and has worked with many couture and designer fashion brands like Dior, Gucci, and Versace. She is also branded as an activist who supports causes related to the Black Lives Matter movement,

animal rights, climate change, and poverty eradication.²⁶ Noonooori is created by Joergz Zuber, a queer white German fashion illustrator and graphic designer, who is also the founder and creative director of a global design and branding agency with offices in Munich, Buenos Aires, and Abu Dhabi. Zuber has appeared in many public interviews during which he consistently emphasizes how Noonooori is entangled with his own fashion dreams since he was five-years old (Chekoufi 2018; L. deLisa Coleman 2018).

In other words, Zuber takes a highly auteurist approach toward the creation of Noonooori and sees himself as inseparable from her. She is a digital, prosthetic extension of her queer white male creator that fulfills his fantasy of embodying a female doll since childhood. As previously discussed, this aspiration is realized by employing a form of hybrid, cybernetic drag that utilizes motion capture technology to convert his physical body into spatial data, which can then be altered and merged with the design of Noonooori. Noonooori is intentionally crafted as a non-human entity, possessing gendered but race-less qualities as part of Zuber's cross-gender identity exploration. As already argued in early Internet studies scholarship by Lisa Nakamura (2002) and Mimi Thi Nguyen (2003), the fluid and hybrid nature of a cyborg subject, which transcends boundaries between physical and virtual space or across identities, makes the creation of a digital avatar particularly appealing to queer individuals. It provides a space for queer folks to play with and redefine gender and sexuality. Noonooori embodies Zuber's gender reconstruction in a way that resonates with many others who use drag as a method to challenge and deconstruct essentialist gender standards while expressing diverse sexual identities. Yet there

²⁶ The self-branding as a BLM activist and an activist for other causes taps into debates about and critiques of slacktivism or armchair activism on the one hand, and corporate activism on the other hand. While there is no denying that potential positive impact of online amplification for any social movement, it is important to notice how the performative activism by many progressively designed computer-generated influencers is mobilized more for the performance of an attractive kind of corporate selfhood.

are more complexities to Noonnoouri as a digital drag act that challenges the social determinism of Zuber's body by creating new selves/subjects using mocap's indexical but non-mimetic body mapping capability.

This particular act of queer subversion of gender is achieved through the construction of a cyborg supposedly devoid of race. Zuber claims that he did not construct Noonnoouri to be a human—having deliberately designed her with a cartoonish look and asserted her dependence on humans (L. deLisa Coleman 2018)—and, hence, Noonnoouri does not conform to racial and ethnic identities like humans. However, her overall design is very human-like, and Zuber also lists Kim Kardashian and Naomi Campbell as his main inspirations when creating Noonnoouri (L. deLisa Coleman 2018). In fact, Noonnoouri regularly posts still and moving images of herself alongside Kardashian and Campbell on Instagram. These posts regard Kardashian and Campbell as Noonnoouri's idols, expressing her love toward the two. Kardashian, a non-Black Armenian American celebrity leading the racial ambiguity aesthetic trend, is well known for Blackfishing and the exploitation of Black culture. While Noonnoouri has a cartoon-ish look, many of her features resemble those of Kardashian's. That is, Noonnoouri also embodies the aesthetic trend of racial/ethnic ambiguity. Kardashian's "ethnic but not *too* much" Armenian American identity plus her digitally and surgically assisted Brown features position her at a desirable distance away from whiteness (Jackson 2019). At the same time, Noonnoouri draws inspirations from Black British supermodel Naomi Campbell's iconic poses while her physical poses and motions are mostly powered by her white male creator. Blackness is yet again treated as a source to extract cool cultural capital. Campbell is fixated as a token of Blackness while being disregarded for and erased of Blackness as her iconic Black aesthetics and styles are transferred to Noonnoouri's digital, but clearly non-Black body. Despite claiming to be an ally of BLM, the design and

construction of Noonnoouri operate under a post-racial logic that ends up realizing a softer yet nonetheless problematic form of contemporary racial capitalism wherein high economic value is derived and extracted from Black bodies.

Another telling sign of Noonnoouri's digital Blackface practices includes her use of dark skin tone emojis in captions as a non-Black character created by a white man (Noonnoouri [@noonnoouri] 2019). Perhaps Zuber and his team think Noonnoouri can use dark skin emojis because her other muse Naomi Campbell is a Black supermodel, pointing to how Noonnoouri is constructed as a universal, post-racial virtual character. In one post wherein Noonnoouri is posed right next to Campbell, the caption is a supposedly playful "need a tan" while tagging Campbell as Noonnoouri's muse (Noonnoouri [@noonnoouri] 2018). The rhetoric connotes an understanding of race as purely pigments on a color wheel instead of a social construct that materially conditions how one experiences the world. Noonnoouri is one of many images created by and for non-Black people that objectify Black womanhood, de-racialize and dematerialize Black bodies, and emulate Black cool for marketing. As a virtual influencer designed and operated by a queer white man to be a vocal aid of Black Lives Matter, Noonnoouri takes over the "white savior" character with a subject position that emulates—instead of challenges—hierarchical colonial and racial relations (Sobande 2020). The absent recognition and reflection on Noonnoouri's own racial/ethnic identities affirms and aligns with a kind of neoliberal multicultural, color-blind, post-racial ideology persistent in supposedly forward-looking corporate marketing, from consumer tech and internet companies' ads in the late 1990s (Nakamura 2002) to mainstream "intersectional femvertising" in the mid-2010s (Sobande 2020).

The race-less design of Noonnoouri as a universal virtual human is not solely based on Zuber's queer white body: it draws inspirations from Campbell's Black body and Kardashian's

racially ambiguous aesthetics. The production of her image also relies on the hidden laboring bodies of a group of 3D artist-technicians, many of whom are based in Latin America. Her vocalizations as a virtual singer are additionally based on a singer whose identity is hidden to us. Triangulating the different sources that Noonnoouri embodies reveals the intricate social relations encapsulated in her rhetorical and material creation. The absence of racial identity in the design of Noonnoouri simultaneously occludes and exposes the emerging discussion on trans-racial performance. Noonnoouri represents a queer liberal humanist desire for a future beyond body that is grounded in post-racial mobility and fluidity. The particularity of race is literally nullified as “radical similarity” (Nguyen 2003, 294) in order to create room for the manifestation of gender and sexual fluidity. Furthermore, Noonnoouri’s lack of a racial identity makes her an even more desirable subject for racial capitalism, which thrives on racial ambiguity and flexibility to attract and profit from as many racial and ethnic communities as possible. Noonnoouri thus has a unique and contradictory relation to racial identity politics, resulting from a synergy of color blindness and multicultural neoliberalism, even if it is not designed to be associated with any specific race.

Shudu: Digital Identity Play and the Commercialization of Blackness

Shudu joined the Internet in 2017 as a dark-skinned Black African British digital supermodel in her mid-to-late 20s. With a massive following, she has worked with fashion magazines and brands like *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and Balmain along with tech/car companies like Samsung, BMW, and Smart Car. The queer white creator Wilson created Shudu as an accidental outcome of his digital play. Unlike Noonnoouri’s design rhetoric of racelessness, Shudu is built as “authentically” ebony. She is a digital supermodel who draws inspirations from a South African Princess Barbie and prominent Black supermodels Naomi Campbell, Alek Wek,

and Iman whom Wilson adores as a fashion photographer (Product Innovation 2019; Kane, n.d.). Wilson established the digital model agency The Diigitals shortly after the launch of Shudu. The company website asserts that Shudu and others showcase how 3D fashion modelling can be creatively incorporated for captivating brand marketing.

The design choice of Shudu aims to exploit the commercial value of diversity. The utilization of dark skin and traditional-presenting attire signifies authenticity, representing what an ideal Black African diasporic woman looks like in the imagination of a queer white British man, that is further based on a Barbie doll. Mattel's Princess of South Africa Barbie Doll was released in 2002 as part of the Dolls of the World the Princess Collection. Per the official description, Princess of South Africa's dress and accessories are inspired by Ndebele traditional attire, the same background that Wilson imagines for Shudu. The Barbie's dress features a black and white pattern, and it is styled with a colorful cape on top. Additionally, she is wearing tight-fitting neck rings and ankle rings, a golden and red headpiece, hoop earrings, and a dancing mace (Barbie Wiki, n.d.). Like the Barbie, Shudu wears her hair short and is often photographed with tight-fitting stacked neck rings and eye-catching earrings. In a way, Shudu is like Wilson's personal, digitized 3D Black African Barbie with whom he can experiment in different creative directions, a social media and editorial friendly edition of digital avatars common in online gaming, fantasy, and chat spaces. Early photos of Shudu exemplify how she is intentionally constructed as a canvas to exhibit racial diversity and cultural exoticism (Sobande 2021, 135), including the now mainstream visual cues of stacked neck rings and bracelets, as well as the earrings in the shape of the continent of Africa. Like most popular imaginations of Africa, Shudu and her accessories are designed in an essentialist way that signals and stands in as African-ness,

reinforcing the erasure of diversity within Africa, and continues the Orientalist, colonial gaze upon African women.

Wilson publicly positions Shudu as a digital art project not for money but “to express [himself]” (Contributor 2018). Wilson sees race as both distinctive and resemblant in relation to his queer white self. Engaging in digital identity play, namely by assuming the body of an idealized dark-skinned Black African British woman, enables Wilson to express himself free from his gay white British body. This activity exploits a latent imperialistic inclination that is present in both the normalized language around online role-playing and the seeking of solace through digital making. The conception of Shudu thus represents a case of digital racial passing, continuing the desire for “orientalized theatricality” in different forms of “identity tourism” from colonial novels to game plays (Nakamura 2002, 39). Shudu also typifies what Stuart Hall calls “the spectacle of the other” as the creation feeds into commodity spectacle and racial fetishism of the white male creator and the broader society (Hall 1997). Race and ethnicity of virtual influencers are being reduced to costumes to be explored, or, as bell hooks (1992, 21) suggests, a spice that can liven up the dullness of mainstream white culture through desirable flavors of Otherness. Since Shudu, Wilson has produced an assembly of ideal racial others in a multicultural vision under the rhetoric of diversifying digital supermodels with six other virtual models and four virtual brand ambassadors. He leverages his privilege as an established fashion photographer with significant mobility to assume blackness in the construction of Shudu, and further present this deliberate construction of racialized and gendered fantasy as advantageous. Shudu thus sits at the intersection of the colonial imagination of exotic authenticity and the manifestation of cosmetic multiculturalism. As a racialized cultural commodity, Shudu is marketed as unique based on the deliberate design of her race. Shudu’s virtual Blackness is

mobilized as the key packaging layer to signify her difference. Race is the prosthetic or the external surface that wraps around the virtual influencer's multi-faceted physical substrate. The Diigitals dresses up its virtual influencers with racial costumes as signs that "textualize" their identities to maximize value (Ryan 1991, 190). The body and the skin mutually inform each other to shape Shudu as a distinct – and distinctly profitable – cultural product.

My previous analysis of Shudu additionally indicates that The Diigitals' decision to make visible Shudu's character writer and stand-in models is driven by the need to establish a positive reputation and reception of Shudu. In an interview, Wilson elaborates on how Shudu and other 3D models require a team of artists for employment for the benefit of one perfect model "who's born lucky" (Tietjen 2018). Going beyond this industry talk, we need to understand that Black female proxy laborers serve indispensable material and rhetorical functions in the production and marketing of Shudu. Following the exposure that Shudu was fabricated by a white man and the subsequent criticisms from Black and Brown women, Wilson recruited actual Black diasporic women to not only authenticate Shudu but also promote his benevolent decision to employ real-life Black female creatives. Through the intentional design of Shudu as a Black woman and the strategic deployment of several Black women as Shudu's stand-in performers, Wilson tries to supplant his whiteness and practices of digital Blackface in the creation of Shudu. He does this by centering race or Blackness as an essentialist visual-rhetoric regime detached from its historical contexts and material conditions. The marketing rhetoric of Shudu performs selective transparency to capitalize on-screen diversity, reducing the race of Shudu to a mere visual effect while also affirming her race and racialized gender with real-life Black female creatives. The making of Shudu, as a design fantasy, ultimately appropriates the imagined experiences of racial otherness and obfuscates the mechanisms of social relations in the manufacturing process.

Miquela: Mestiza/Mulata Cyborg and the Marketing of Queer Latinidad

Lil Miquela entered the social media landscape in 2016 via Instagram and has acquired 2.7 million followers at the time of writing. Miquela is portrayed as a teenage girl of Brazilian American descent with light skin, hailing from the Los Angeles area, a place with a significant Latinx population. She supports the Black Lives Matter movement and other social activist campaigns. Miquela was named as one of the 25 most influential persons on the internet by *Time Magazine* in 2018, and the first CG influencer and virtual artist to be represented by Creative Artist Agency (Spangler 2020). Despite her specific Brazilian identity, Miquela's self-presentation prioritizes the broader Latina identity: she describes herself as a Brown, mixed-race, queer, Latina fembot. Miquela, as a popular figure in influencer marketing, is intentionally created to embody a cohesive pan-Latin identity. Her appearance, characterized by light olive skin, straight dark hair, and dark eyes, adheres to the widely accepted standards associated with the feminine Latin aesthetic (Dávila 2012). The emphasis on her Latina identity aims to attract a wide range of Latinx consumers. This also meets the demand for diversity on screen in the liberal multiculturalist media industry (Cepeda 2016). Miquela's success as a virtual Latina avatar reinforces the conception of Latinidad in the digital sphere, an assumed collective identity of Latina/o/x individuals that tends to overshadow the distinct cultural and historical characteristics of various communities. The creation of Miquela utilizes the commonly recognized Latin appearance as both a form of currency and a technology (Negrón-Muntaner 1997). Her digital body, imbued with racial and gender markers, is being circulated and disseminated as a cultural and economic commodity within the global racial capitalist concept of Latinidad.

Miquela is not simply designed as a Latina, but a mestiza/mulata cyborg who assumes a blend of whiteness, Brownness, Blackness, and queerness. The deliberate decision to portray Miquela as a queer metisza/mulata aligns with a fetishism toward the in-betweenness and the aesthetic appeal of racial ambiguity (Boshier 2020). The design of Miquela as a mestiza/mulata cyborg with a typical Latin look highlights her mixedness to embrace a sense of white and light-skinned Hispanicity (Candelario 2017), as “the ethnic/racial ambiguity is more easily accepted when the model is a white Latino or Latina” (Dávila 2012, 114). Miquela’s mestiza/mulata cyborg identity functions as a design feature that interpellates Latinx as a marketable identity that is subject to processes of racialization and whitening (Dávila 2008), as well as a floating signifier devoid of real content, substance, and politics (Hall 1997).

Furthermore, Brud attempts to fuse elements of Blackness into her image in order to appeal to a hip urban audience. Miquela is depicted as an advocate for Black Lives Matter and other social causes/movements using a co-opted activist language. In addition, Brud highlights Black female celebrities as Miquela’s role models. Miquela’s 2017 *Paper Magazine* feature paid homage to Lil’ Kim’s “Luxury Item” photoshoot from 1997 in *Interview Magazine* (Weiss 2017). These posts are presented as Miquela expressing admiration for accomplished Black women in the entertainment industry, but in reality, they are garnering attention and financial gains by appropriating Black popular culture. Young artists Yara Shahidi and H.E.R., who are of mixed-race Black heritage, are mentioned as Miquela’s personal role models (Walker 2018). This aligns with the deliberate portrayal of Miquela as a virtual celebrity and pop singer who identifies as both queer and of mixed racial background, highlighting her porousness and fluidity in navigating binary systems of racial and sexual identifications.

The popular commercial portrayals of cyborgs, like Miquela, often misinterpret and misuse Donna Haraway's (1985) conceptualization of cyborgs: instead of recognizing cyborgs as an essential component of Third World women's struggles, most have equated cyborgs with women of color. They also mistakenly associate mutant/cyborg bodies with inherent marginalization and innate fluidity (Nguyen 2003). The portrayal of Lil Miquela as a queer mestiza/mulata robot-human not only allows her to transcend constraints related to physicality, sexuality, and race/ethnicity, but also presents this privileging of fluidity and hybridity as more fashionable and appealing in an era that actively commodifies differences. However, what are the repercussions of glorifying this highly commercialized representation of queer Latinidad as a new ideal pan-Latina identity in the context of influencer marketing on social media? Mobility, fluidity, porousness, fungibility, and hybridity are not the apex of freedom. Instead of joining in queer and feminist mestiza/mulata movements, Miquela stands in for this new "ideal" mestiza/mulata cyborg that invokes the Latina body as an interface through which desired forms of Latinidad are produced and circulated to shape a new generation of ideal consumers.

My analysis of the production of Miquela further align with the assertion that racialized virtual influencers are oftentimes "digital canvases," or a means for their creators to promote the idea of racial diversity, while simultaneously excluding involvement from Black individuals or not compensating them (Sobande 2021, 135). Brud emphasizes on-screen representations and profitable performances of diversity by creating a Latina fembot; it, however, does not demonstrate a commitment to off-screen diversity and anti-racist practices in its production. Brud mystifies Miquela's presence by concealing the production process, especially regarding the visibility and identities of her stand-in performers. Brud not only fails to prioritize hiring Black and Brown mestiza/mulata performers in real life, but also supports the use of digital

Blackface and Brownface with the discrepancy between the purported identity of the avatar and those of her stand-in laborers. The practice of maintaining secrecy to create the illusion of a virtual celebrity, along with the persuasive use of post-corporeal production and the opaque technological process, worsens the already precarious position of proxy workers, as demonstrated by Brud's practices of cross-racial/ethnic casting.

Additionally, there is a noticeable absence of diversity in Brud's leadership and management roles. The team comprising visual effect animators and engineers exhibits a significantly higher level of racial diversity. However, the majority of these individuals find themselves in precarious positions, engaging in freelance technical work for Brud. Simply put, Brud disproportionately restricts opportunities for Black and Brown creative workers, despite heavily incorporating Black celebrity and cultural aesthetics. The Miquela case study showcases a heightened focus on branding that capitalizes on diverse on-screen representation, while neglecting the importance of off-screen diversity and the material advantages it brings to communities of color. Brands, advertisers, and venture capitalists are primarily concerned with Miquela's identity as a female robot of color. The rise of diverse virtual influencers in the mediascape can be attributed to the appeal to commercialize diversity and prevalent social justice discussions online.

Miquela's commercial triumph exemplifies the global fetishization of Black and Brown culture while simultaneously neglecting the value and recognition of Black and Brown individuals (Elam 2005; Crockett 2008; Jackson 2019). One might wonder how this could be possible when Miquela was a project conceived by a Black man and a Latinx woman, unlike how Noonouri and Shudu were both created by white men. Minority-owned media and minority-led cultural production are not necessarily alternatives to predominantly white

production cultures. According to Saha (2018, 23), “the logics behind rationalization in industrial cultural production are so dominant and persuasive that it can be seen why even apparently enlightened minority producers end up producing racialized tropes in their work.” For instance, the hidden yet problematic practices of digital Blackface and Brownface in Miquela’s technical construction process could have been reframed as maximizing the creative potential of the mocap technology and rationalized as commonly acceptable practices in media, cultural, and tech industries.

All three virtual avatars demonstrated the process of race-making in the updated context of social media influencer culture. This chapter examined digital identity formation through racialized and gendered virtual influencers: I attended to the process whereby identity markers, especially race, gender, and sexuality, are digitally constructed and strategically deployed to signify certain ideals and dynamics. Each virtual influencer functions as a distinct racial project, what sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant conceptualize as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines” (Omi and Winant 2015, 125). The designs of Noonouri, Shudu, and Miquela reveal how racial signifiers and identity markers are used in the visual rhetoric of social media marketing communication, and that each project reproduces the broader patterning of difference in our social system despite claiming to challenge this very system. Unearthing the racializing logic in strategic designs of “diverse” virtual influencers reveals the ghostly operation of the post-racial myth, of the illusion that we have moved past the racial and racism. Specters in virtual influencer production thus include not only hidden proxy laborers in the technical production, but also spectral processes of

race-making and racial erasure through strategic deployment of the hypervisibility of racial characteristics and the increasing naturalization of whiteness.

Conclusion

The glamor of “diverse” virtual influencers with racialized, ethnicized bodies is achieved through a combination of often-hidden proxy labor, including the physical work of posing/walking/acting/singing/writing, the affective labor of modeling/acting/embodying someone else, and the cultural labor of leaning into token diversity and engaging in cross-racial performance. Proxy workers’ embodied labor and performance are foundational to the production of highly profitable virtual influencers. Yet these stand-in workers continue to face precarity in terms of job security and income despite the levels of viewership and profit these virtual influencers generate. Furthermore, virtual identity construction and the subsequent reliance on stand-in labor reinforce existing racial, gender, and class dynamics. Virtual influencer production demands a racialized, feminized surrogate labor infrastructure to process, translate, and materialize the creator’s vision and cultural industries’ rationalization of a profitable virtual star. Despite being marketed as digital activists, “diverse” virtual influencers are ultimately racialized cultural commodities through which corporates, brands, and producers extract capital, labor, and other resources under the guise of on-screen representational politics.²⁷ Virtual influencer production is only one of many sites where the spectralization and devaluation

²⁷ While the focus on this chapter is on the politics of virtual influencer production—especially the making of virtual influencers as symbolic goods imbued with differences—it would be remiss of me to not acknowledge the importance to also examine the politics of circulation in the age of social media, and how the racialized logics behind platform policies, interface designs, and algorithmic cultures have further facilitated race-making and extractive practices. In my future endeavor of turning this dissertation into a book, I will write an additional chapter through further research and theorization on the logics of circulation and amplification in the platform economy.

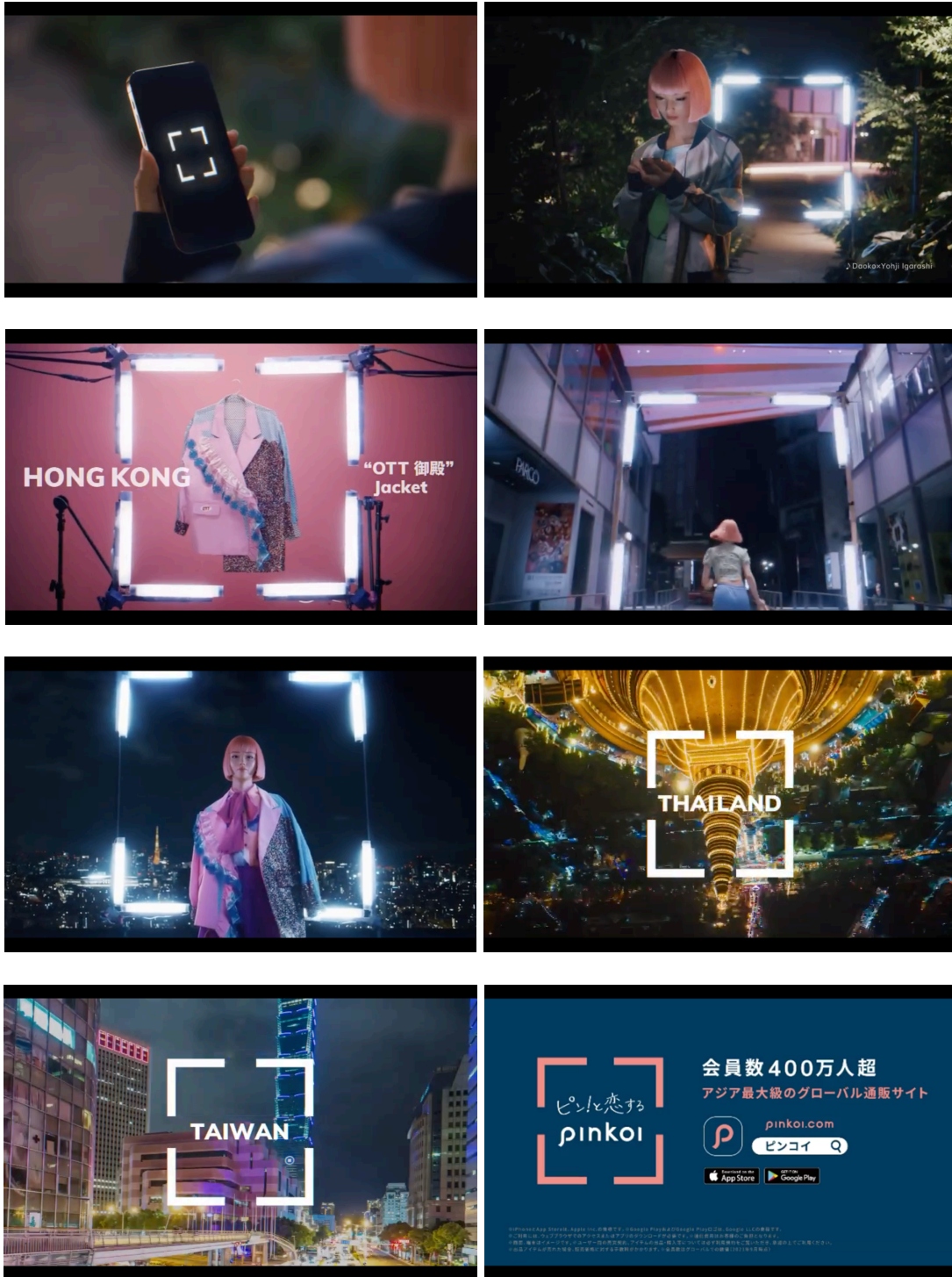
of labor are taking place. In the network of creator culture and consumer economy, virtual influencers are nodes primarily produced to advertise and sell goods, converting the rhetoric of newness and virtuality into concrete clicks, sales, and financial gains. In the next chapter, I mobilize a spectral vision to uncover the ubiquitous, essential, yet often-obscured labor at the nexus of content creation, e-commerce marketing, and logistics operation.

CHAPTER 2 Ghosts in the Machine: The Encounters of Content Creators and Delivery Drivers in E-Commerce Influencer Media²⁸

Brands and corporations in today's digital economy operate on the promise of seamless integration. Consumers develop desires for products during mundane encounters with ubiquitous branded content. They click a link that directs them to a site to shop and place an order with free shipping. Goods are expected to be securely delivered to their doorstep in a day or two. The product is presumably packaged neatly to provide a positive unboxing experience. This idea of a frictionless e-commerce operation is premised upon the predominant ideal of seamlessness attached to both digital technologies and supply chains as an ethereal infrastructure with no cost to the consumer and negligible impact on the environment. This rhetorical emphasis on seamlessness is also often mediated through the visual field as an aesthetic of fluidity in e-commerce advertisements. In January 2021, Amazon Fashion released a short concept film featuring Japanese fashion lifestyle virtual influencer Imma promoting their launch of several physical fashion items to be sold on the global e-commerce giant. This video features montages that emphasize Imma's (im)material fluidity while wearing items from the advertised collection. Images of Imma traversing physical, digitally simulated, and animated environments are edited together to create a sense of frictionless operation across different spatial dimensions.

A few months later, Taiwanese e-commerce platform Pinkoi also released an ad featuring Imma. Imma, fashion goods, and Asian metropolises are linked together through a white square object: it morphs between a digital design on screen and a physical frame [Figures 7a-h]. The

²⁸ Parts of this chapter were published in *Mediapolis* as a dossier essay titled "Spectacle and Specter: Handling Boxes In Between Digital Content Creation, E-Commerce Advertising, and Last-Mile Delivery" (2024).



Figures 8a-h. Screenshots from the Imma X Pinkoi commercial (2021).

square functions as an interface across different space-times. Imma walks through these portals, instantly teleporting herself between major Asian metropolises, and across digital and physical

worlds. This aesthetic choice in e-commerce marketing utilizes the physical-digital fluidity of Imma as a virtual influencer to establish the visual rhetoric of an effortless shopping experience. The transforming white square object is mobilized to signal the possibility of the platform. That is, Pinkoi brings together designed goods from East and Southeast Asia, acting as an interface whereby customers can simultaneously shop from independent designers whose products are otherwise difficult to obtain. Imma's (im)material fluidity is used to bolster the image of Pinkoi as an e-commerce platform whose success depends on a seamless integration of the digital and the material, i.e., both the usability of its digital site and the reliability of its supply chain. Virtual influencer Imma thus becomes a fluid, flexible, frictionless symbol of the ideal e-commerce operation across marketing, platform, and logistics. Previously in Chapter 1, I discussed how the rhetoric of virtuality, creativity, and face-value diversity surrounding virtual influencers like Imma mendaciously claims to dematerialize their production processes, devaluing the human labor of their stand-in performers, and masking the racializing logic of digital cultural production. In this chapter, I look to the ideological function of purportedly friction-free commerce in our current stage of digital capitalism. I will show how the rhetorical focus on seamlessness and the aesthetic of fluidity mediated through e-commerce marketing media in collaboration with virtual influencers obfuscates the intricate material realities of the actual workflow and labor conditions of global e-commerce operations in the age of influencer culture and platform economies. I will triangulate e-commerce/fashion marketing featuring virtual influencers with social media content produced by "less perfect" human influencers, such as unboxing videos and 'a day in my life' vlogs to unveil the frictions and the material labor involved in digital cultural production.

This chapter peels back the façade of seamlessness by examining e-commerce influencer media. Influencer culture is the pinnacle of a consumption-based economy that is predicated on the production, circulation, and consumption of (im)material commodities from images to physical goods. As intermediaries between brands and consumers, beauty and fashion lifestyle creators are firmly situated at the intersection of platformized media production, brand marketing, and e-commerce logistics. In 2019, human influencer Roxette Arisa Howe uploaded a unique unboxing video on her YouTube channel. Howe, a California-based, mixed race, Japanese American mega beauty influencer, had returned to her apartment after a months-long trip.²⁹ At the front entrance, piles of packages awaited her, prompting her to record a grand unboxing video as she decluttered the area. These were public relations (PR) packages, complimentary products given to influencers by a brand as a part of the company's PR and marketing strategies. Howe arranged these boxes in tall stacks, which nearly reached the ceiling. A doorbell rings right before Howe is about to take apart the box wall staging to cut open all the outer packages: A UPS driver has arrived to deliver more boxes. This brief "interruption" momentarily dispels the magic of click-and-arrive as a seamless technology of zero work conveyed through the aesthetic of excess. It is also a momentary detour by which the interdependence of creative and menial labor in and beyond the digital realm is highlighted. The off-screen UPS worker in Howe's video, for instance, is channeled through the rupture of her filming process. Although we cannot see the delivery driver, the materiality of their labor leaves an on-screen residue that is perceived by those who are willing to see.

Delivery drivers are not invisible in real life. Unlike digital technical systems with predominantly hidden infrastructures as communicated through the metaphor of 'black box', the

²⁹ Mega-influencer is a tier of influencers with at least 1 million followers.

e-commerce logistical system is ubiquitous and in plain sight. We frequently interact with the last-mile logistical systems, from having to swerve to avoid delivery vans on the streets and simply tracking our packages on an app, to leaving notes to the couriers and dropping off return packages to a store. Because of the ubiquity of this ‘brown box’ infrastructure, its infrastructural labor is often taken for granted in our daily lives. The popular discourse of seamless delivery operations emphasizing characteristics of high speed, low cost, and contactless exchange haunts the material realities of the e-commerce pipeline. Although supply chains are rarely discussed in influencer scholarship, influencers’ interactions with logistical labor and infrastructure seeps unexpectedly into popular audiovisual media. Writing from the perspective of a media scholar and continuous consumer of influencer media and e-commerce businesses, I will now unpack the spectralized forms of labor in e-commerce influencer media.

The encounter between Howe and the UPS driver reveals a kind of relational labor (Baym 2015) engaged by influencers that goes beyond building relationships with brands and followers. Without a functioning logistics labor network and infrastructure, influencers would not be able to unbox, review, and market products in a timely way. As a central node in the influencer economy, individual influencers thus perform relational labor in connection to other infrastructural nodes whose labor is often rendered spectral, including last-mile delivery drivers. This anecdote suggests that unboxing videos and the digital vernacular of media texts are valuable for studying the overlapping of varying infrastructures and/as labor (Parks and Starosielski 2015) that sustain the digital economy. On the one hand, the aesthetic of influencer media prioritizes spectacles of commodity – as reflected in the tall stacks of delivered packages in Howe’s video – which function as images of attraction that often mask and devalue unrecognized and less marketable forms of work in both digital cultural production and e-

commerce operation. On the other hand, influencer media texts have the potential to visualize the interdependent relationships in e-commerce-driven influencer culture by presenting relational labor performed in the interactions between social media influencers and logistics workers. In other words, although influencer media texts are often disregarded as frivolous and not worthy of scholarly attention, they can provide an insightful perspective that begins to excavate the layers of ghost work in influencer culture and economies.

To illustrate the disjuncture between the rhetoric of seamlessness/aesthetic of excess and the material assemblages of influencer culture, I examine three different e-commerce influencer media examples of varied genres – unboxing videos by beauty YouTubers, e-commerce ads featuring virtual influencers, and vlogs by content creators who work in logistics – as sites of converging digital cultural production and e-commerce operation wherein buried connections between creative and logistical laboring bodies resurface [Figures 9a-c]. Many e-commercial influencer media texts are fictional and accidental process videos wherein lies both the logic of capital accumulation and the spectral presence of undervalued labor. Increasing numbers of e-commerce companies are working with famed virtual influencers in their commercials – like Amazon’s commercial with Imma – to project a fluid and appealing vision of an e-commerce operational workflow from marketing to distribution.³⁰ At the same time, the popularity of unboxing videos has turned the genre into a key marketing vehicle for e-commerce businesses. Howe’s PR unboxing haul video, for instance, offers insights on the operating scale of brand-driven influencer marketing through its PR box spectacle; it also captures a creator’s process of

³⁰ Some brands even construct virtual avatars specifically for their marketing. For example, Lu of Magalu is a massively popular avatar influencer developed by the Brazilian retail company Magazine Luiza to represent the brand itself. She is positioned at once as the company’s digital specialist and a content creator on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.



Figures 9a-c. The top is a screenshot from Roxette Arisa Howe's YouTube video "MY BIGGEST PR UNBOXING HAUL EVER *not clickbait*" (2019). The middle is a screenshot from the Amazon X Imma concept film "Tokyo Chaos" (2021). The bottom is a screenshot from Shanique Bella's YouTube video "A Day in the Life of An Amazon Delivery Driver" (2021).

handling an excessive number of brand-sent products delivered by couriers. Meanwhile, more logistical workers, especially delivery drivers and truckers, have become content creators by documenting their work and sharing videos on social media. Many content creators and influencers have no sustainable stream of income and are also working part-time jobs in logistics to feed themselves while hoping to “make it” soon. For example, Shanique Bella is a Connecticut-based Black Jamaican American beauty lifestyle nano-influencer who also works as an Amazon delivery driver and a freelance beauty worker.³¹ Juxtaposing these different scenarios of overlapping influencer and logistic production reveals varying entanglements between influencer culture and logistics industries.

It is hard to miss the recurring motif of the box across Figures 9a-c. These brown boxes simultaneously function as technical objects, aesthetic forms, and metaphors. Materially speaking, these are outer delivery boxes, usually made with brown cardboard, that serve as an exterior to physically protect and secure the items inside. The outer packaging is designed to prevent damage to valuable products and beautiful product packaging throughout the bumpy shipping journey, usually a combination of sea, air, rail, and road. Formally speaking, these brown boxes represent sold physical commodities circulated in the last phase of the e-commerce supply chain: being packed into cardboard boxes, loaded onto delivery vans, dropped off at doorsteps, and unpacked by customers. They signal the continuous circulation of goods, the generation of new desires, and the ongoing accumulation of capital, which extends to this seamless and excessive machine of advanced consumer capitalism. In other words, the widely circulated object, image, and idea of boxes become the primary site where people interface with material goods, cultural commodities, and the broader consumer culture. Literal and mediated

³¹ Nano-influencer is a tier of influencers with fewer than 10k followers.

boxes are interfaces through which different contacts and exchanges are negotiated, mobilizing materials and labor from across the influencer ecosystem. In a way, this chapter performs a kind of critical interface analysis (Andersen and Pold 2011) as I excavate the specters and logics behind the double infrastructural and representational functions of these boxes as logistical objects and objects of the imagination (Hockenberry et. al. 2021). Triangulating the (im)materiality of boxes in the three case studies as e-commerce infrastructure with layered material and symbolic functions shed lights on hideous forms of work, and how racialized and gendered bodies of spectralized forms of workers are assembled as commodity, labor, and infrastructure in supply chain media. My analyses of e-commerce influencer media texts and contexts illuminate the deep entanglement between media and logistics as two global operating systems that coordinate labor, infrastructure, capital, and resources to sell and distribute global commodities.

PR Unboxing Haul Videos: Constructing Excess and Finding Specters

PR unboxing haul videos bring together common terms in the influencer economy. Haul refers to a substantial gain that is commonly used to describe the results of a shopping spree on social media. PR is a key aspect of any company's brand-building via media. Traditionally, a publicist communicates a company's updates and distributes press releases to offer the media readymade angles to write about. In the age of social media, many mid-to-top-tier influencers are included on a company's influencer marketing and PR lists.³² PR packages are free products

³² Being on a company's influencer marketing list suggests that there exist one-time or continued partnerships between a brand and a creator. Being on a brand's PR list generally mean a creator receives company news (like the launch of a new collection), free products, and invitations to brand events.

influencers receive from a brand. Different from an official brand partnership or paid advertisements, influencers are not obliged to review products sent via PR or speak highly of them.³³ Most beauty influencers integrate some PR products into their content to cut down on the high cost of purchasing new launches to review for their viewers.³⁴ PR unboxing haul videos are predominantly created by beauty lifestyle influencers on YouTube to incorporate PR products into their content and maintain relationships with brands and viewers. It is an overlooked feminized category within the unboxing genre that has a rather different set of aesthetics, narrative structures, and rhetorical conventions.³⁵ Toy and tech unboxing videos tend to focus on only one or a few products per video and often directly start with beautiful inner product packaging. PR unboxing haul videos highlight the process of going through excessive quantity of brand-sent boxes, turning the sheer quantity of free stuff into a spectacle to attract viewers.³⁶

³³ Beauty influencers often acknowledge which products featured in their videos are sent to them for free via PR in the description box, and sometimes vocally in the video. They often preface with phrases like “I received [a certain product] in PR but my opinions are not influenced.” It is not uncommon for influencers to tone down their criticism for certain products and hype up their approval for others for purposes such as keeping a good relationship with brands and boosting incomes through their affiliate links.

³⁴ In the detailed description box of most beauty YouTube video, it is common to see a full list of products mentioned and disclosures of whether the creator has been in partnerships with the brand and/or received the products in PR.

³⁵ There is limited existing scholarship on unboxing videos despite it being a core genre of social media that has been widely discussed in the popular media. In some cases, unboxing videos are only briefly mentioned as examples of broader phenomena like virtual word-of-mouth (King et al. 2014), toy collection display (Heljakka 2017), and small encounter stories (Kleut et al. 2018). In some other cases, unboxing videos of particular kinds such as 23andMe genetic testing kit and Record Store Day purchases are analyzed to generate arguments specific to those objects and events (Kragh-Furbo and Tutton 2017; Bates 2020). Among the unboxing-centered publications, attention is mostly on production and creators (Ramos-Serrano and Herrero-Diz 2016; Craig and Cunningham 2017; Walczar 2021), content and video texts (Nicoll and Nansen, 2018; Mowlabocus 2020; Vaudrey 2022), consumption and creator-viewer relations (Marsh 2016; Kim 2020; Mowlabocus 2020; Foster 2021; Vaudrey 2022), and labor and work (Li 2021; Foster 2021). Notably, most existing unboxing literature focuses on the subgenre of toy unboxing videos. See: Marsh 2016 Ramos-Serrano and Herrero-Diz 2016; Craig and Cunningham 2017; Nicoll and Nansen 2018; Walczar 2021.

³⁶ Typical unboxing videos are also more product-centered and experience-driven, providing information about the new product as well as documenting the act of revealing and the experience of touching (Mowlabocus 2020, 566-7). PR unboxing haul videos, however, are more creator-centered and relationship-driven, with the priority focused on building an influencer brand/image by maintaining relationships with brands and viewers.

This section demonstrates how Roxette Arisa Howe's 2019 video titled "MY BIGGEST PR UNBOXING HAUL EVER *not clickbait*" mobilizes a kind of aesthetic of excess that simultaneously obfuscates and creates opportunities to witness the spectral materiality of undervalued labor in e-commerce influencer economy.

The video commences with a high angle, medium closeup shot of Howe in a gray T-shirt adorned with gold ear hoops and rings, a ponytail, and a face of sleek neutral makeup. She poses in front of a pile of cardboard boxes, expressing her excitement by exclaiming, "Alright, alriiiight, alriiiiiight." Howe opted for handheld shots with a vlog camera, resulting in a sense of intimacy and liveliness from the beginning. Howe's arm brings the camera down and toward her with a more natural frame around eye-level to state, "It is time for..." As Howe joyfully reveals "a PR hauuul" while extending her right arm up to signal the stacked wall of boxes, her left arm extends the camera out and down. We see a low angle, medium closeup shot of Howe against the higher-up section of the box wall, with the upward tilt along with Howe's performance contributing to a sense of awe and grandeur toward these stacked boxes. Then she proceeds with shortening the camera distance back to a more natural eye-level position as she states, "This is my biggest PR haul...ever...in all history of my channel, all channels." As Howe shares the backstory behind the excessive scale of this PR unboxing haul, the camera moves between the high-angle and eye-level positions with panning motions to show the width of this box wall. Eager to further prove the grandeur of this unboxing operation, Howe changes into a different position to provide a medium long shot of the box wall. In this brief, transitional phase, we see a closeup on Howe's face and finger, as if she is intimately and privately telling us that "I'm not joking you." We then see a point-of-view medium long shot featuring the central spectacle, the

wide and tall wall of stacked cardboard boxes ready to be opened for “the biggest PR haul [Howe has] seen, done, [and] experienced.”

Viewers of this video are confronted with the hypervisible and performative, yet overlooked and highly disposable, boxes. Conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) has intensified in the digital influencer era, as manifested in the viscosity of abundance, with excessive consumption normalized in the name of style. Stacks upon stacks of boxes are displayed in an aesthetic of copiousness. It took Howe seven hours to unpack all the delivery boxes before she started to film herself talking through each PR package, everything from packaging and marketing information to first impressions and appreciation. Even though cutting open the delivery boxes and unpacking the inside products took a significant amount of time and labor, Howe compressed it into just one minute: approximately 20 seconds of fast forward box opening footage, 30 seconds of her comedic reaction as she hurts her long nail in the process of unboxing, and 10 seconds of handheld aftermath footage showcasing the excessive piles of messy outer containers lying around on the floor. Much of the almost 68-minute video captures the process of going through each PR package product sent by brands. Shipping boxes are only featured in the video’s thumbnail, title, and intro section. These outer boxes function as signs of abundance and accumulation in the background, which further speaks to the spectacularization of stacked boxes as widely circulated imagery of the sublime multitude³⁷ and expresses an overall aesthetic of excess situated amidst varying capitalist social forms and experiences. Howe’s construction of a spectacular wall of stacked boxes in this PR unboxing haul video as an

³⁷ Using sublime multitude to describe these stacked PR packages might seem a bit hyperbolic, but I also see this as a part of the wider circulation of stacked boxes of varying scales in global capitalism. The spectacles of shipping containers, for example, are captured and remediated in many documentaries about global commerce, and in recent years, viral images of mega container ship Ever Given stuck in the Suez Canal in 2021 and constant news reports of global supply chain issues since the COVID-19 pandemic. Delivery boxes and product packaging perform spectacles of excess that are mediated by millions of unboxing videos posted and consumed on digital platforms.

aesthetic superfluous with merely one-minute screen time but requires seven hours of (im)material surplus labor points to how the aesthetics of excess is a symptom of the socioeconomic forms of advanced capitalism. In this scenario, the gimmicky wall of boxes appears to be a simple trick that, in fact, extracts unseen surplus value from living labor. It is not just plain physical labor that is subsumed by capital; everything in life is now mobilized as a kind of labor and resources, whether you are consciously working or not, for capital accumulation in the integrated aesthetic and commodity production.

The spectacle is a key concept I mobilize in this chapter to theorize the rhetoric of seamless/aesthetic of excess; it is also a figure I analyze in relation to the specter and spectralized forms of labor. In tracing how capitalism advances in the post-war flourishing of commodities and images, theorist and critic Guy Debord warns in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) about the pending domination of representation that conjugates the spectacle as “a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (thesis 4). The spectacle should not be dismissed as simply mass-media-generated visual excess but taken seriously as a materialized mode of advanced commodity production and consumption (thesis 6); the spectacle “becomes images” because of constantly accumulating capital (thesis 34). The society of the spectacle has continued to advance in the past five decades, and the spectacle has reached a new height in the present day’s attention-driven digital culture. I argue that the spectacular figure of stacked boxes is indicative of the commodifying logic of the social media attention economy, which “reduces everything to quantitative equivalence” and totalizes the commodity as *the* center of the world to be looked at (theses 38, 42, and 49). It is the excessive quantity of shipping boxes that matters to these creators, not so much the boxes themselves except as a part of the mise-en-scene, as the sheer quantity is what adds to the thrill for viewers to partake in the fetishization of the

commodity. The aesthetics of these products and the culture of overconsumption are what being projected.

The aesthetics of excess can be found across different PR unboxing haul videos in the beauty YouTube community by even bigger-named creators like Tati Westbrook and Laura Lee.³⁸ PR unboxing creators use the opening as a space to establish the scale of the unboxing activity and provide contexts and disclaimers to frame the excessive content that follows. Westbrook always emphasizes the unsponsored nature of these videos whereas Lee reminds viewers that companies send PR products to influencers to benefit from the free marketing of their brands. She establishes that it took her years of work to get to where she is right now and that she did not receive a huge number of free products from the beginning. That is, Lee deflects association of these excessive gifts with frivolous overconsumption toward a demonstration and validation of her career growth as an influencer. These clarifications work hand in hand with the more common disclaimer from influencers concerning excess and possession, stating that it is simply due to the nature of their job and that they are reviewing all these products to save their viewers time and money.

PR unboxing haul videos typically hyper-emphasize the grandness of the influencer's accumulated PR packages via multiple rhetorical, graphic, and cinematic means displayed in the video's title, thumbnail image, and introduction. Title and thumbnail are the first encounters a platform user has with the video as they scroll through the interface, hence the need to intrigue and entice the user to view the content. Most PR unboxing haul videos have titles that emphasize the grandness of the documented unboxing activity through intentional choices of words,

³⁸ Westbrook is one of the biggest beauty influencers with 8.58M YouTube subscribers at the time of writing, and her own makeup and supplement brands. Lee is a top beauty influencer with 4.59M YouTube subscribers at the time of writing, and her own makeup and fashion brands.

capitalized letters, and often, exclamation marks to accentuate the excessive scale and hype up viewers' excitement for witnessing excessive consumption. The introduction exudes the same kind of rhetorical thrill displayed by the title, welcoming viewers in their higher-pitched voice, and sometimes even in songs and chants, to an epic unboxing that might be the biggest unboxing ever as the creator has never seen so many big PR boxes stacked together before. The visual exhibit of joy and excess, as seen in the thumbnail graphics as well as elements of mise-en-scene and camera angle in the intro, enhance the verbal excitement. Most thumbnail images include the creator in front of boxes [Figures 10a-c]. Some creators, like Westbrook, opt for a medium close-up shot that centers themselves taking over most of the frame against stacked boxes as background while holding some unboxed PR products [Figure 10a]. Westbrook's thumbnails also always feature an eye-catching red-on-white graphic with a red 'WOW' and a white speech bubble, emphasizing the wow factor of the PR unboxing content intended to create a feeling of great excitement. Other channels, like those of Howe and Lee, have thumbnails that involve a more balanced ratio of the creator and the boxes, presenting the stacked boxes almost as a co-star [Figures 10b-c]. These medium long or wide shots offer viewers a fuller sense of the context, space, and scale of the PR unboxing activity. We often see the creator sitting in front of a tall, wide wall of boxes, with the packages filling or exceeding the camera frame. The creator usually has a facial expression of joy and/or shock, with their arms extended out in a pose of excitement for a grand showcase or holding a product or product package unpacked from its shipping cardboard box. Sometimes, the creator adds on the outline photo effect popular for YouTube thumbnails to cutout or highlight their own figure against the environment of excessive boxes.



Figures 10a-c. Screenshots of PR unboxing haul video thumbnails by Tati Westbrook, Laura Lee, and Roxette Arisa Howe.

The different processes of opening shipping boxes also relate to how these stacked boxes are spectacularized. Some creators like to go through these delivery boxes one by one with stacked boxes in the background. Westbrook, for instance, tends to have her family – her husband and sometimes her stepson – cut open each package for her to focus on the products inside. The stack of plain boxes that serve as the backdrop throughout the unboxing process is juxtaposed with each beautiful product package in the foreground. Viewers also witness the decreasing quantity of boxes in background as a signal of time passage. Alternatively, some creators gravitate toward showing the entire stacked box wall in the intro and then proceed to discussing products from pre-opened boxes without boxes as the backdrop. Howe specifically has developed this system of filming herself cutting open all the shipping boxes and removing all the product packages all at once. She inserts this process as a sped-up clip, usually under a minute and with comedic highlights, as a transition between her intro and product review/appreciation sections. Howe (2021) rationalizes her workflow by taking into consideration how viewers generally are not interested in outer delivery boxes and the mundane process of ripping them open. Lee (2019) rationalizes her decision of not even filming herself cutting open cardboard boxes as a time-saving mechanism since people are more interested in product packages and the products themselves. The difference ways to construct and enhance the spectacle of stacked boxes in PR unboxing haul videos help both the creators and their viewers to partake in the fetishization of the commodity. At the same time, attending to these differences in

spectacle construction give notice to the box wall as an ornamental surface that holds a tension between these boxes' functions as technical objects and aesthetic forms, between these boxes' attention-grabbing quality and the amount of work they demand off screen.

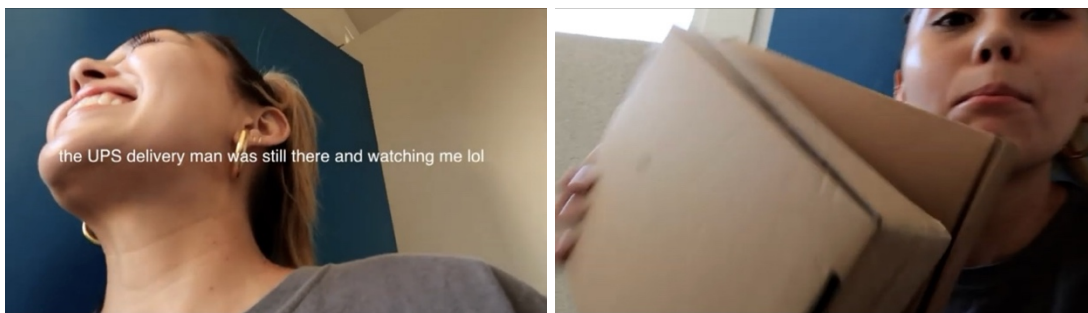
These magnificently stacked delivery boxes serve as a gimmick, an “aesthetically suspicious object” (Ngai 2020, 1) and “a survival strategy” (9) exists to contrive, fascinate, and shock viewers while concealing the structure of extraction in various ways. Creating content itself can be seen as a tactic deployed by both professional and amateur creators to convert an otherwise mundane, time-consuming, boring, and private operation of their work into an attraction and a social form of labor. The construction of an excessive PR box wall for social media content creation as a gimmick extracts unpaid labor time dedicated by creators themselves and their family/friends³⁹ – from tidying up the home and constructing a PR box wall to cutting open boxes and discarding packaging materials – as surplus value. Home-based informal work, despite being often devalued as feminized, unproductive activities, is foundational to generate the PR box wall as an image to commodify attention in social media production. The entanglement between domestic work and home-based influencer media production as surplus labor will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3. A gimmick like a huge PR box wall is not only an aesthetic expression of excess but also a compromised aesthetic form that encodes the unstable state of capitalism. Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai (2020, 6) writes in *Theory of the Gimmick*: “Like capitalism itself, in which paradoxes like planned obsolescence and routinized innovation about, the gimmick is a temporally sensitive and fundamentally unstable form.” There are two

³⁹ As previously mentioned, Westbrook's husband and stepson frequently help her unbox. Lee's niece often appears in her videos and help her with unboxing as well. Howe's PR unboxing haul videos usually feature herself, but her 2019 vlog titled “ORGANIZING MY PR BOXES & APARTMENT VLOG” shows her enlisting a friend's help to clean up her apartment and organize a pile of PR boxes.

folds to this argument that I am building on: the instability of capitalism, and the instability of gimmick as an expression of capitalism. The unstable nature of capitalism is widely accepted by scholars of capitalism. When tracing the history of capitalist crisis formation and resolution, for instance, Marxist geographer David Harvey (1992) asserts a few characteristics of capitalism: it thrives on the production of difference; it pursues growth regardless of consequences; and above all, it is crisis-prone and generate insecurity. Ngai theorizes the gimmick as a miniature model of capital that is contradictory, chaotic, compromised, and unstable. As discussed, an extravagant PR box wall is a short-lived spectacle with minimal screentime that functions to lure viewers. It is built specifically as an aesthetic phenomenon to be taken down and apart. Furthermore, a tall box wall itself is unstable, always on the edge of falling apart by itself and throughout the process of unboxing. In other words, the box wall spectacle in PR unboxing haul videos is an aesthetic mode that encodes how influencer media production maximizes the extraction of surplus value from living labor and the chronic instability of capitalism. The functioning of a PR box wall as a temporary gimmick invokes ambivalent affects of excess and deficiency (Ngai 2020, 35), simultaneously masking and revealing the operation of extractive capitalism and its volatility. In this chapter, I ask: what are the material conditions that shape the grandiose yet unstable aesthetics of excess crucial to the entanglement of influencer marketing, content creation, and e-commerce supply chains? How do we unearth the shadowy, seemingly absent laboring bodies behind the recurring, hypervisible motif of boxes in e-commerce influencer media?

To address these questions, I mobilize the concept of spectrality. As previously established in the Introduction Chapter, spectrality is a concept of in-betweenness. Specters are inherently unstable: they are invisible and out of place; but they are transgressive and leave

material traces. In this chapter, specters of the influencer ecosystem are read in relation to the spectacularization of images in the influencer culture. The spectacle is a hypervisible figure that captures how the overrepresentation of certain images of a marginalized subject in fact obfuscates that subject in the broader discursive environment. As a figure that is at once present and absent, the specter reveals its ghostly presence at unexpected moments and sites through tangible traces detectable by our sensory faculty. The spectacularization of boxes in the e-commerce-driven social media culture ends up obfuscating living labor in influencer industries, from content creators to delivery drivers. I juxtapose the spectacle, as exemplified by the box wall, with the spectral presence of laboring bodies in influencer media.



Figures 11a-b. Screenshots from Howe's brief interaction with the UPS worker.

How does this sense of spectrality manifest itself in Howe's video? A doorbell rings right before Howe is about to take apart the box wall staging to cut open all the outer packages: a UPS driver has arrived to deliver more boxes. A specter makes itself known sonically as sounds of boxes being dropped off, which penetrated through the contained media time-space of a spectacular box wall ready to be taken apart. The delivery driver's arrival, often overlooked as part of the friction-free infrastructure, interrupted the seamless flow of the PR unboxing haul video. Howe recounts how she started talking into her vlog camera when the delivery worker finished delivery and was waiting for the elevator. The delivery worker became curious about who she was talking to and returned to her door. With this unexpected move, which is at odds

with frictionlessness and efficiency, the off-screen delivery worker becomes a specter that troubles the boundary between two arbitrarily separated systems/spaces. In the snippet of footage [Figures 11a-b] that Howe edited into the video, we cannot see the worker himself and can vaguely hear his voice in the background. But we can see and hear Howe, who was holding two delivered brown boxes in one hand and a vlog camera in another, awkwardly saying “oh, hi, thank you, sorry.” The muffled voice of the delivery driver coming from the off-screen space is blended into the background. I replayed that few seconds of footage over and over again, like a detective trying to decipher the secret code. Unfortunately, the exact exchange between the two remains a mystery and continues to haunt me. The limited access to the sound/voice of the delivery driver prompts me to ask: What are being left out? What kinds of sounds and images might have been recorded by the vlog camera but did not make it into the video itself? Perhaps the inaccessible, spectral quality of the muffled voice is reflective of the laboring condition of delivery workers as overlooked, peripheral laborers. From the off-frame interaction captured to the muttered background voice and foregrounded white text, the haunting presence of the delivery worker is visible to those who pay attention, intruding on but not entirely disrupting Howe’s filming process. The spectral vision—and hearing—allows us to bring together different unexpected but related sites from e-commerce advertisements to delivery vlogs to expose the material circumstances and working conditions of laboring bodies in e-commerce influencer media and its economy. The critical framework of spectrality illuminates the devaluation and obfuscation of delivery drivers as infrastructural labor at the nexus of social media production, e-commerce marketing, and last-mile logistics.

From E-commerce Advertisements to Delivery Driver Vlogs

Introduced by Tokyo-based Japanese virtual human company Aww Inc., Imma is a Japanese fashion lifestyle computer-generated influencer with short bubble-gum pink hair.⁴⁰ As suggested by the two opening scenarios, Imma frequently collaborates with transnational e-commerce brands and platforms. Built by a tech company to be bilingual in Japanese and English, Imma is actively marketed beyond Japan through her collaborations with international brands from Calvin Klein and IKEA to Amazon and Pinkoi. In January 2021, Imma launched a collaboration with Amazon Fashion featuring limited editions of physical fashion items. Key to the marketing is an accompanying concept film titled “Tokyo Chaos.” As previously mentioned, this video mobilizes cross-cutting to emphasize Imma’s (im)material fluidity and Amazon’s frictionless operation. In this video, Imma wakes up and finds herself immersed in a simulated cityscape [Figure 12a], looking at high-rises with LED screens displaying images of her that heavily feature her body parts including her eyes, face, and pink hair [Figures 12b-c]. She performs miscellaneous activities in the city of Tokyo throughout the day, including modeling for a photoshoot [Figure 13a] and sorting packages in a delivery truck [Figure 13b].



Figures 12a-c. Screenshots from the Amazon X Imma concept film “Tokyo Chaos” (2021).

⁴⁰ Esperanza Miyake (2022) argues that the production of Imma as a ‘Western’-facing virtual influencer interested in ‘Japanese culture, film and art’ captures a complex dynamic of digital and self-Orientalism and the consumption of Japanese raciality.



Figures 13a-c. Screenshots from the Amazon X Imma concept film “Tokyo Chaos” (2021).

These images signify how Imma is envisioned in Amazon’s e-commerce marketing and logistical imaginaries. Figures 11a-c resembles the Shibuya district in Tokyo featuring an urban landscape saturated with big and small screens. Instead of showcasing ads for different brands and products, all the urban screens here solely feature Imma. The cityscape is imagined as a canvas/background to advertise Imma as a cultural commodity: The city becomes Instagram, with city screens serving as the display interface to circulate and consume Imma as the ideal virtual Japanese girl. Drawing on scholarship on the fragmentation of the female body as the perfect object/production (Mulvey 1975) and the discursive function of Asian eyes in yellowface performances (Palumbo-Liu 1999), Esperanza Miyake (2022) emphasizes that the almond-shaped eye of Imma heavily featured in her Instagram posts—and on urban screens—materializes her virtual Japanese-ness and exotic Otherness. In line with Japanese cyberpunk imaginations of the city as an information society since the 1960s, Tokyo is further transformed in this add by architectural urban screens [Figures 12a-b] and pop-up social media screens [Figure 12c] into a city of consumption wherein architecture becomes a backdrop overlaid by “circuits of information and desire,” or even a “sea of signs” (Yatsuka 1990, 40). Huge video screens on high-rises as seen in Figures 12a-b have become ubiquitous in Tokyo since the 1990s. With urban architecture becoming more dematerialized as a flow of images and a symbolic site in the public discourse, the cityscape is essentially a highly commercialized mediascape.

In the constructed city space in this Amazon ad, Imma is imagined as a cultural commodity with her body/information constantly being extracted, circulated, and consumed in the digital city. The stacked displays of Imma through these screen “boxes” of varying sizes share similarities with the previously discussed spectacle of stacked delivery boxes in Howe’s PR unboxing haul video. The transition from Figure 12a to Figure 12c shows Imma being more and more engulfed by accumulating images of herself. Imma starts off standing in a flower field looking up and afar at more distant screens displaying her images on high-rises. She eventually becomes situated in the middle of the city/media-scape on a floating platform surrounded by screens on a much larger scale. As more and more images of Imma pop up and lay on top of the already highly simulated urban landscape, the space around her and her sense of self by extension is being encroached upon in this engulfing environment of spectacle-making by totalizing Imma as a commodity to be looked at from all directions and on varying scales. The materiality of these screen boxes and the production contexts of the images that shape such an aesthetic of accumulation, however, are often overshadowed by the sheer magnitude of their existence. As a global-facing commercial targeting Japanese and “Western” consumers of Amazon Fashion, the spectacularized packaging of Imma as a racialized and gendered commodity in a stereotypical techno-Orientalist setting hyper-emphasizes Japanese raciality and femininity as images for consumption.

But as these massive screen facades dominate our visual field, the video implies that logistical labor and other activities take place underneath. We catch glimpses of how product images of fashion articles on Amazon and social media are produced [Figure 13a]. Imma models pieces of clothing from this launch against an artificial backdrop of blue sky and green hills amidst the greyish urban space. Four men are holding down the backdrop while Imma is being

directed and photographed. But Imma is not just the model whose images are being produced and projected. As seen in Figure 13b, Imma is also portrayed as a “package handler” in an Amazon truck. In the final scene of this video commercial, we see a truck parking in an alleyway with piles of brown Amazon boxes with the smile icon stacked in an aesthetically pleasing way. Far from being practical, these uniquely stacked Amazon boxes in the ad operate on symbolic and affective levels. In *Buy Now*, Emily West (2022, 51) discusses how Amazon elicits affective investments from consumers via symbolic and material means built into people’s consistent experiences of and with Amazon’s modest yet distinctly branded delivery boxes. The box itself is simple, usually in brown cardboard material with printed “Amazon” and/or “Prime” and its signature smile-like curved arrow. Materially speaking, the box is a central interface whereby consumers physically interact with Amazon as a retail and logistics brand, as the box will be seen, touched, and cut open before the contained products are revealed. Symbolically, the humble design of an Amazon box points to the brand as providing trustworthy distribution services to bring customers joy by ensuring the safe and speedy arrivals of ordered goods (56).

In the delivery van scene in the commercial, Imma wears a shirt dress from her own Amazon Fashion collection, sitting up straight while holding a small package on an architecturally interesting metal chair positioned in the middle of these box piles. Imma is not actually handling or delivering these Amazon packages; she poses as a model for a photoshoot. Two men wearing T-shirts from her collection close the truck door as Imma is putting the small package down on a pile. The truck is then being driven by an off-screen driver en route to delivery while the logo of Amazon Fashion appears on screen [Figure 13c]. Situated in a delivery truck together with boxes of physical goods, Imma is ultimately positioned as a racialized, gendered material commodity like those clothing items Amazon sells under her name. Imma thus

serves as an ideal circulatory commodity for Amazon Fashion symbolically through the excessive screen display marketing, and materially through the physical clothing items. Material commodities are circulated through big and small boxes in delivery trucks driven on busy streets and delivered to apartments in packed buildings. These are mundane but infrastructural laboring activities performed by logistics workers who are made spectral in the video, overshadowed by the spectacle of urban screens. If the sea of Imma on urban screens emphasizes her immateriality and fluidity as signs, these final appearances of Imma posing for photoshoots and interacting with physical delivery materials highlight her materiality, while obscuring highly exploitative and subhuman material conditions experienced by Amazon delivery drivers and warehouse workers that are crucial to the ever-flourishing e-commerce industry.⁴¹ The material conditions portrayed in the staged image of Imma “loading” in the back of a delivery van is inaccurate and far from the reality experienced by thousands of Amazon delivery drivers around the world. The capitalist portrayal of a marketable e-commerce operation in today’s consumer society is one that is not only fast and seamless but also with an image of happy, well-treated workers. Such a façade is, however, always haunted by the real labor conditions of Amazon delivery drivers. The truth is easily accessible to people who care, with stories widely reported by news outlets and documented by drivers themselves on social media platforms.

Consider, for example, the differences between Figure 8b and Figure 8c, which are respective screenshots from the 2011 Amazon ad with Imma “Tokyo Chaos” and YouTuber Shanique Bella’s 2011 video “A Day in the Life of An Amazon Delivery Driver.” Both images portray the loading phase of the workday during which the driver packs their van with the several

⁴¹ I am also haunted by the unnamed surrogate performer(s) who stand in as Imma throughout the video shoot, following what I discussed in Chapter 1. The spectacle of Imma is thus haunted by the spectral existence of proxy performers, in addition to the labor conditions of Amazon delivery drivers as discussed in this chapter.

hundred packages assigned to them for delivery that day. Unlike the photoshoot-like set-up in the commercial with Imma that presents chicness and effortlessness, Bella's vlog documents the repetitive hard work of moving and organizing packages in her van: huge bags of packages on the shelves on screen right and oversized heavy packages on screen left. The attempt at humanizing Imma in the form of roleplay ends up erasing the real delivery drivers performing labor. The work of loading the van and strategically arranging the massive number of assigned packages for efficiency is absent from the ad. The stacked Amazon boxes serve mostly an aesthetic function as staging props: this image resembles the previously discussed PR box wall in that both box stacks function as spectacles; this scenario is different in that the aesthetic of excess here does not come from the quantity of boxes stacked up, but their arrangement. The arrangement is so far from the reality of how delivery boxes are loaded that the dissonance becomes a site through which the operating logic of masking and the presence of spectrality in this ad are made clearer to the viewers. Imma's virtual Japanese body is spectaclized and commodified at different scales – from massive urban screens to a gimmicky⁴² racial interface to distract, hide, and beautify the reality faced by Amazon delivery drivers. This Amazon ad makes use of Imma's qualities of virtuality and (im)material fluidity to enhance the rhetoric of its purportedly seamless operation. It further mobilizes a racially coded aesthetic of excess to obfuscate the real laboring bodies and activities taking place.

As people's desire toward the products inside delivery boxes illustrates commodity fetishism, Amazon—as the brand that delivers us our desired goods—produces “distribution fetishism” (West 2022, 52), which further enhances customers' attention and affection toward commodities and their short delivery time, disregarding the corresponding human and

⁴² Virtual influencers are often considered as a marketing gimmick that capitalizes on attention and fascination.

environmental costs. Amazon delivery vlogs like the ones by Bella challenge and complicate the officially projected distribution fetishism. Bags upon bags of Amazon boxes are visualized on screen not to elicit joy from consumers but to illustrate the work performed by delivery drivers as logistical laborers to fulfill customer's demand and Amazon's promise. At the same time, Amazon delivery vloggers are appealing to a form of logistics fetishism in that they appeal to viewers' desire to learn more about the inner workings of Amazon delivery and Amazon as an e-commerce logistics empire. Emphasizing the crazy number of packages and the challenging nature of their job in this vernacular content helps delivery drivers assert the value of their labor.

If the delivery driver is never on screen but implied in previously analyzed videos of Howe and Imma, I next focus on Bella who creates content regarding her work as a nano-influencer, delivery driver, and beauty worker. Shanique Bella is a Black Jamaican woman based in Connecticut whose social media profiles emphasize her passion for beauty and lifestyle. While her Instagram page is heavily curated with predominately glam photos of herself, her YouTube channel has a wider range of content, from makeup and hair tutorials to shopping hauls and travel vlogs. Further, Bella's videos about delivering for Amazon as a Delivery Service Partner (DSP) driver and setting up her home beauty studio space document her jobs as a courier and beauty worker on top of being a nano-influencer with close to 2.5k followers on Instagram and YouTube as of January 2024. Juggling multiple jobs before one might get to "make it" doing their dream job has been the norm of creative cultural industries, which is further intensified since the rise of the platform economy. As a microcelebrity, Bella cannot live off being a relatively unknown beauty YouTuber and lifestyle vlogger. For small creators and influencers, their internet fame demands more hustling to earn a basic livelihood, and they produce more content in the hopes of someday making a sustainable living doing things that they love (Duffy

2017). Even for mid-level creators with a moderately successful number of subscribers and views, their internet fame does not usually translate to financial security. As early BuzzFeed video personality and YouTube comedian Gabe Dunn (2015) has shared: “One week, I was stopped for photos six times while perusing comic books in downtown LA. The next week, I sat faceless in a room of 40 people *vying for a menial courier job*. I’ve walked a red carpet with \$80 in my bank account” (emphasis added).

“Vying for a menial courier job” suggests so many things all at once. It shows creativity as the pride of struggling creative workers who are exploited by the digital cultural industries and the cultural hierarchy around how delivery jobs are perceived as unskilled and hence less desirable. But one must earn money in order to eat, pay rent and utility bills, and also create content that requires equipment, software, and new products to review and style. It is against this context that many creators and influencers work multiple jobs as baristas, waitresses, and delivery drivers, to name a few. Many also take on gigs in the areas related to their social media profile in order to cultivate a symbiotic relationship between growing their platforms and working outside gigs. Both paths hold true in the case of Bella as she works both as an Amazon DSP delivery driver and as a beauty worker doing clients’ lashes and hair. One of Bella’s reels shows her editing a video one late evening with an inspirational quote that encourages everyone to make time for what matters: “It won’t happen overnight but if you quit it won’t happen at all” (Shanique Bella @ms.shanique 2024). Bella is an “aspirational laborer” who engages in “a forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production” -- one that is also highly gendered (Duffy 2016). While it is more common to think of the relationship between beauty influencers and delivery drivers simply as the latter delivering goods to the former, the case study of Bella shows that there are also aspiring and smaller beauty

influencers who both receive PR packages *and* work as logistical laborers who deliver them, sometimes perhaps even to their role models and colleagues. This “unexpected” converging site of influencer and logistical production is thus rather common.

Bella has only recorded three videos related to Amazon delivery to date, but they are all in her top five most popular videos on her YouTube channel at the time of writing [Figure 14]. Her delivery videos also received significantly more engagements in their comment sections

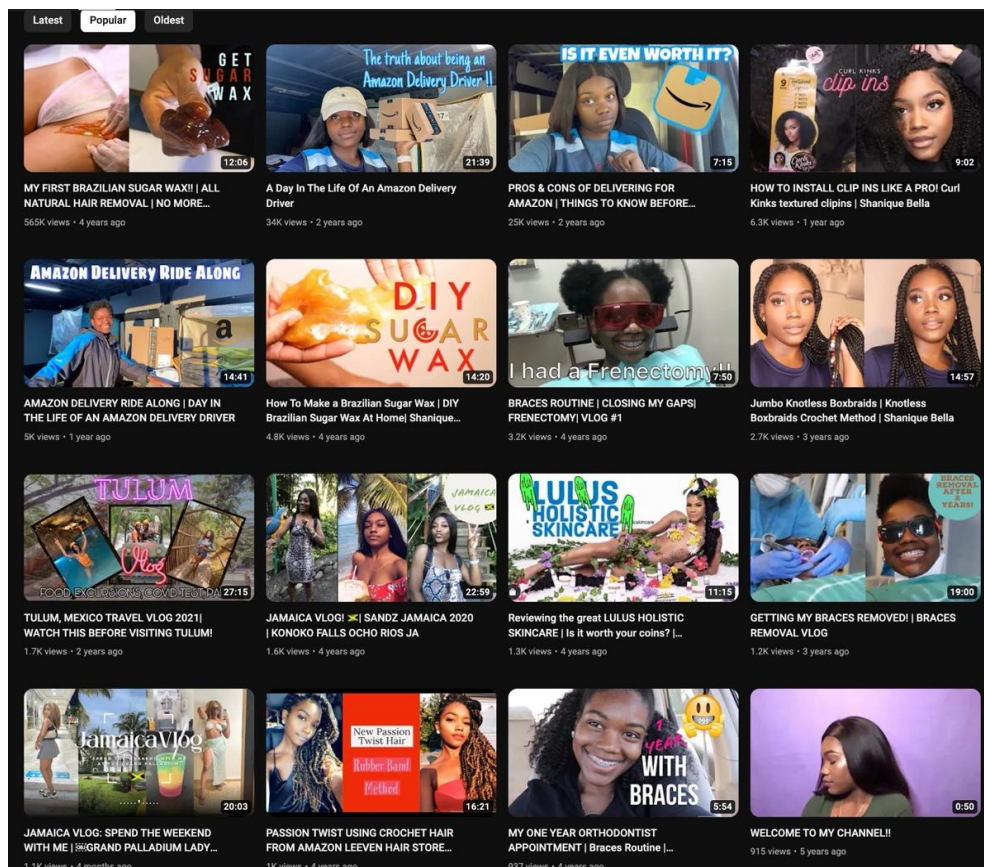


Figure 14. A screenshot of Shanique Bella's YouTube video page sorted by view counts.

compared to her beauty video and lifestyle vlog content. This is partly because Bella's three Amazon delivery videos are all popular genres and themes in the Courier YouTube community: two 'day in my life' vlogs and one 'pros and cons' video. These videos tapped into the active courier community on YouTube, many of whom frequently watch videos and share their

experiences as delivery workers. Delivery driver-creators in the US tend to make content on YouTube and/or TikTok, utilizing social media platforms to connect with an imagined community of delivery drivers working for different courier companies. Amazon driver-creators “signal expertise” (Ashton and Patel 2018) through the staging of authentic work identities and locations from wearing Amazon uniforms to filming their videos in their Amazon van. Most content is filmed in a delivery vehicle on their personal smartphones during their breaks or when they have longer bouts of driving. The mise-en-scene of uniforms and work vans, the ambience of packages in the back, and the occasional sounds of GPS or traffic authenticate the experience. Such authenticity is further supported by the vlogging aesthetics, with a lot of talking into the camera and some point-of-view documentation of Amazon apps and packages. Amazon driver creators also tend to signal expertise through their speech, from casually mentioning the length and efficiency of their day to consistently articulating their observations, experiments, and self-theorizations. These include discussions of why people quit Amazon DSP, pros and cons of the job, tips to improve efficiency, hacks to maximize pay, workarounds to rules, and technologies including Amazon apps and surveillance cameras. Such constant articulation of one’s labor specialization is also a way to curate and maintain one’s online self-as-brand.

Despite having a few videos on Amazon delivery work, Bella is not primarily an Amazon delivery-creator but a beauty and lifestyle vlogger, as indicated through her YouTube banner. Most of the videos on her channels are vlogs, from ‘a day/morning/night in my life’ videos to travel vlogs. Two of her delivery videos fit under this category as well, but are more specific to her job as an Amazon DSP delivery driver. As a relatively unknown small creator, Bella is situated at the intersection of the beauty, vlog, and courier communities on YouTube, struggling to really establish herself as a visible brand and commodity that can be converted into more

sustainable career opportunities and everyday livelihood. Nonetheless, she perseveres and continues to hustle across digital cultural production, beauty work, and e-commerce logistics. These three industries are all key participants in the platformized turn, capitalizing on the fungible and interchangeable workforce in the gig economy as platform labor. Digital platforms—from social media sites like YouTube to workplace platforms like Amazon’s driver surveillance app Mentor—turn labor into data and capital stream for corporate risk management and revenue growth. The precarities and failed promises of visibility experienced by a typical platformized creative and logistical worker like Bella is left to be shouldered by herself.

Comparing the scenarios of Howe and Bella illustrates significant disparities within the influencer economy, as most social media creators face layered precarities regarding market, industry, and platform uncertainties (Duffy et al. 2021). Despite the common belief that social media platforms flourish on its democratization and accessibility, the attention economy operates as much on the logic of visibility as it does on the reality of inequality. Creators with already underprivileged backgrounds, and hence fewer resources, are less likely to maximize and capitalize on their online visibility growth. Howe was an elite figure skater before becoming a beauty YouTuber while also pursuing a college degree in communication and working in the industry as a social media manager and a writer. She was able to convert her interest in makeup along with a working knowledge of audience engagement and community management into a social media career as a beauty guru. Bella, on the other hand, is building her brand as a small beauty lifestyle creator on top of working as a delivery driver and a beauty technician. While Howe spent a day stacking up the wall of PR boxes and then taking them apart to create the aesthetic of superfluity, Bella spends days loading her Amazon van and delivering packages to hundreds of addressees. Juggling across different jobs has left Bella significantly less time and

energy not only to produce social media content, but also to adapt to the temporality that governs fast-changing market trends, platform policies, and algorithmic systems. The rhetoric of democratization in digital cultural production obfuscates social media's reliance on and intensification of existing social inequalities.

Let us return to the three juxtaposed images posted earlier in the chapter [Figures 9a-c]. In Figure 9a, Howe is performing the highly visible labor of social media marketing, producing a wall of PR boxes that become an interface that both attracts attention as a spectacle and facilitates brand and audience relations. Her work as a content creator is to maximize exposure and sales for e-commerce business while also dependent on the infrastructural labor performed by invisible workers like delivery drivers. In Figure 9b, Imma is strategically designed to stand in as a delivery worker, which misrepresents the labor condition of Amazon delivery drivers. This visual portrayal attempts to, on the one hand, materialize Imma from a cultural commodity to physical commodity, and on the other hand, humanize her by positioning her as courier. Imma becomes an interface whereby her performances as an (im)material commodity and a logistics worker beautify the material conditions and invisibility faced by actual Amazon delivery drivers as labor and/as infrastructure. In Figure 9c, Bella is loading her Amazon van with packages to prepare for her delivery tasks of the day. At the same time, she is vlogging her workday so that she can create content for her small YouTube channel when she has the time. While her YouTube channel has not surfaced from obscurity, Bella put in the work to film beauty tutorials and review videos that ultimately benefit these brands more than her channel. These three case studies point us to three different sites of convergence across digital cultural production, e-commerce marketing, and last-mile logistics.

From the off-screen UPS delivery worker in Howe's video to Bella's self-documentation as an Amazon delivery driver, I have complicated the discourse of labor invisibility, shedding light on the interwoven precarities experienced by undervalued laborers who operate in plain sight but are still rendered peripheral. Logistics workers and small-scale social media creators are situated in what Anita Say Chan (2014) has called "networking peripheries," performing underpaid labor under capitalistic exploitation and the commodification of bodies/data as part of e-commerce logistics and the creator economy. While seemingly out of place in her beauty and lifestyle channel, Bella's Amazon delivery videos document slices of precarious workers' lived experiences in a digital culture and platform economy. She is a node in a chain of gendered and racialized labor linked to one another by bonds of capital production and goods distribution conditioned by digital capitalism (Precarity Lab 2019). The surrogate labor discussed in Chapter 1, the logistics labor highlighted in this chapter, and the tidying/managerial labor to be explored in Chapter 3 are all part of this precarious network of labor across varying sectors in the influencer ecosystem.

Triangulating PR unboxing haul videos, e-commerce ads featuring virtual influencers, and Amazon delivery workers' vlogs is thus a relational materialist approach that activates one's spectral vision when engaging with the frictionless rhetoric and excesses of e-commerce influencer media production. The layered presence of specters pierces the ideal image of a smooth space of flows, inviting reconsideration of the material conditions and operative logics that shape the circulation of image/commodity/capital. These politics of operation cut across different sectors in the influencer ecosystem.

Coda

In early 2022, Motherboard published a report on the TikTok trend of users posting videos of Amazon delivery drivers dancing per requests in the Amazon app instruction section and/or a note on the door to dance for the home surveillance camera, including Amazon's own Ring (Jackson 2022). Some delivery associates ignore these requests while others follow through to avoid getting dinged on their rating/metrics. Without any mechanisms of consent and compensation, everyday consumers—who are already benefiting from the entitlement of one-to-two-day free shipping built on the extremely extractive workplace practices of Amazon logistics—are now further abusing their power with the aid of surveillance technologies from the Amazon app to the Ring camera. These requests range from doing the chicken dance or a twirl to saying, 'thank you for keeping me employed.' Overworked and underpaid delivery workers are not simply performing infrastructural work in plain sight; they are dehumanized for the sake of Amazon customers' entertainment and control in the name of customer service. Amazon delivery workers' images and voices are source materials virtually extracted by consumers through seemingly banal technological interfaces like the Amazon e-commerce app and the Amazon Ring camera that operationalize disciplinary logics. Their bodies and performances supply free content to Amazon customers, who post these media on the latter's TikTok accounts for views, amusement, and sometimes, virality. This is thus another site of converging content creation and logistics operation whereby delivery drivers are asked to conduct the labor of both distributing physical goods and generating immaterial commodities on demand. In this scenario, consumers are afforded the power to behave like a boss: they surveil, manage, instruct – or indeed – punish logistical workers from the comfort of their home. In the next chapter, my focus will transition from the masking and extraction of delivery drivers as ghost laborers in social media influencer

production cultures and e-commerce operations to how home-based content creation mobilizes literal management of home, personal brand, relationships with corporations and audiences, and material excess. Together, these social and economic phenomena illustrate the spectralization of work happening at both the interior and exterior of the home.

CHAPTER 3 Nested (Im)material Labor: Managing Home, Waste, and Self while Producing Closet Decluttering Videos⁴³

Scenario 1: In 2018, Leighannsays, a white, Texas-based macro lifestyle influencer,⁴⁴ was tackling a huge round of closet clear-out. She loved shopping but was not a fan of cleaning. Leighannsays took her followers with her on this journey of closet decluttering, partially following the popular KonMari method. The process was exhausting and Leighannsays ditched the KonMari method early on, but she was proud of her results with stacks upon stacks of clothes cleared out. She shared her imperfect side with viewers, reacquainted herself with neglected items, and bonded with long-time followers in the comments section. Huge bags of clothes were dropped off at a local Goodwill store.

Scenario Two: In 2019, Bestdressed, a (then) California-based Asian American mega fashion influencer,⁴⁵ was documenting an “extreme closet cleanout.” After the long decluttering process, she sifted through more than five hours of footage to create an eighteen-minute video. Responding to user comments requesting more footage of her decision process, Bestdressed put together a bonus video with edited talking clips for her second channel Bestmess. She also sorted through pieces and prepared them for online resale. She modeled, took pictures, catalogued, priced, and wrote a description for each item. She made shipping labels, wrote thank you notes, packed all orders, and dropped them off at a parcel delivery service.

Japanese tidying expert Marie Kondo has become a household name, with her terms “tidying up,” “declutter,” and “spark joy” entering our colloquial vocabulary. The key is the KonMari method, a two-part classification system of discarding and organizing: You first envision the kind of lifestyle you aspire to living, sort through items by categories, rate each item based on whether it “sparks joy” and fits your aspirations, keep the ones that do and discard the

⁴³ Portions of this chapter were published in *Television and New Media* as a referred journal article titled “Digital Domestic (Im)material Labor: Managing Waste and Self While Producing Closet Decluttering Videos” (2023).

⁴⁴ Macro-influencer is a tier of influencer with between 500,000 and 1 million followers.

⁴⁵ Mega-influencer is a tier of influencers with at least 1 million followers.

rest. You then re-sort the remaining items back into the closet with like-things stored together, and organize items in each container with her folding methods to ensure vertical storage to maximize your ability to see all the items you own. The method travels beyond the official realm of Marie Kondo content, which includes bestselling books *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (2014) and *Spark Joy* (2016) as well as Netflix shows *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019) and *Sparkling Joy with Marie Kondo* (2021), to be frequently translated into a fan vernacular with internet users actively sharing their processes and results online.

This recent decluttering wave is a part of the thriving multimedia lifestyle industry that has been mitigating people's long-standing anxieties about self-making, homemaking and the aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone 1991; Leavitt 2002; Rutherford 2003). It partakes in the long tradition of gendered communication designed to reach middle-class "housewives" with lifestyle-centered programming (Ouellette 2016; Spigel 1992). Closet decluttering videos on YouTube extend lifestyle programming's self-regulating function, framing "work" not as a site of value production and labor struggles but as an investment in bettering oneself in the quest for the good life. These videos offer insights into how popular housework self-help videos are consumed, reinterpreted, practiced, and recirculated. They also illuminate how domestic labor is folded into digital creations for authenticity and, in turn, stronger brand image and community interaction, in hope of potential indirect or alternative monetary rewards. In this chapter, I argue that the cultural production of closet decluttering videos mobilizes highly gendered, (im)material form of tidying labor as part of maintaining a creator's digital authentic self and community. This highly constructed performance of self is additionally interdependent with tidying labor undertaken for the spectralized management of closet/home, content, and waste – online and off – in and beyond domestic spaces.

Both digital and domestic labor today are underpaid and/or unwaged occupations that face precarity and exploitation that is coextensive with traditional economies (Scholz 2013). On screen and off, influencers perform domestic labor and creative work to keep their home, clothes, and self-image tasteful. Taste work is not only creative, affective, and inspirational but also material, physical, and instrumental (Pham 2015, 7). The politics of closet decluttering video production elucidates the “nested precarity” (Duffy et al. 2021) of gendered digital and domestic labor in social media production. The domestic sphere is often separated from the production site, with the latter deemed productive and monetized but the former deemed unproductive and unmonetized, exemplifying capitalism’s extraction of unpaid labor as dark value, or hidden, surplus value at sites of production (Clelland 2013). Not recognized as labor and hence a spectralized form of labor, housework has been naturalized as a gendered attribute that is characterized as “a labor of love” and therefore does not require a wage (Federici [1975] 2012). Ouellette (2019) builds on discussions of home-based women’s labor, proposing that Kondo’s promise of greater well-being through cleaning and curated consumption is dependent on the spectralization of women’s work. The production of closet decluttering videos, I posit, mobilizes gendered notions of labor that includes housework and creator labor. Domestic labor shares many (im)material qualities with the feminized, unpaid digital labor performed by influencers. Wardrobe clean-out videos – as a form of home-based media production – are thus a productive site for recognizing the feminization and spectralization of digital work in relation to a long history of unrecognized, feminized, affective housework (Jarrett 2014).

Feminist discussions of work are foundational to the theorization of digital (im)material labor, as many non-feminist labor debates ignore the fundamentally (im)material aspects of the domestic sphere (Fortunati 2007). Domestic work mobilizes intertwined physical chores and

immaterial expressions performed by a gendered laboring body essential to the maintenance and production of capital (Jarrett 2014). In producing social media content about closet decluttering, digital prosumer laborers partake in and mobilize free and underpaid (im)material home-based work, online and off (Terranova 2000). This chapter aligns with the analysis found in feminist media scholarship of the ways gender and class figure into digital work. In addition, I will disentangle the relations among fashion/declutter creators as digital consumers, home managers, and producers of both cultural texts and household trash. This approach recognizes both the do-it-all-by-oneself characteristic of social media creators and closet decluttering video production as an overlooked site of converging media, home, and trash production.

I build on a body of scholarship and popular texts on household management theory, tracing how concepts like work, organization systems, efficiency, and maintenance are adapted to the performance of self and home on social media. From Marie Kondo's self-help media to vernacular production of closet decluttering activities on social media platforms, this chapter looks at the mediatization and circulation of management ideas and work through media forms like books, TV shows, and YouTube videos (Andrijasevic et al. 2021). These media disseminate ideas regarding managerial practices across the gendered domains of home and digital cultural production, hence contributing to the formation and amplification of notions pertaining to work, labor, and value creation. The managerial logic of decluttering applies Taylorist notions of efficiency and productivity at the site of the home. A self-managerial logic permeates different tasks behind the home-based production of closet decluttering videos and social media management: from the management of wardrobe as a home/workspace to content and digital asset management, from personal brand management to audience management. In other words, managerial work is a key aspect of influencer production. Influencer media texts like closet

decluttering videos are performed process genres (Skvirsky 2020) that mediate how management works both materially and immaterially. Taking seriously these seemingly trivial, home-produced media texts as converging sites of production and management provides insights on layered (im)material labor mobilized by the managerial logic of influencer media and platform economy.

Out of all the possible categories to tidy up, clothes are recommended by Kondo to be decluttered first since they are easier to manage and often hold less sentimental value. Fashion and lifestyle-related influencers with a huge amount of clothing create closet decluttering videos not only to tap into Kondo's popularity but also to re-familiarize themselves with their clothing catalogue and turn the otherwise invisible labor of tidying up into appropriate influencer work content. For most fashion lifestyle influencers, decluttering videos are a periodic production, often aligned with times of transition like New Year resolutions, seasonal changes, and household moving, which call for closet reorganization as part of household management. Closet decluttering expresses the creator's aspirations toward their ideal home/self, performing repair work on an unsatisfactory life. Due to the nature of fashion influencers' work as self-proclaimed fashion experts and trendsetters, the wardrobe serves as a repository for clothing items as their physical work materials. Wardrobe clear-out resembles storage inventory check, cleanup, and disposal for improved efficiency and esthetics. The process of decluttering follows what Craig Robertson (2021, 105) observes as the "cabinet logic" practiced in the arrangement and ordering of objects within a storage space, facilitating the partitioning of object/information for improved efficiency. Simultaneously, fashion lifestyle influencers are social media creators who produce consumable content and perform their selves-as-commodity to build selves-as-brand and maintain relationships with followers-as-community. Their social media profiles are curated

portfolios of virtual self-presentation that are carefully crafted through the process of content/brand/audience management. Turning one's closet decluttering into an online video analogously contributes to the creator's brand and community. While the public revealing of one's clutter may seem to compromise an influencer's otherwise perfectly constructed self-image, these revelations also strengthen a creator's aura of authenticity and relatability, facilitating a sense of intimacy and connection with viewers.

Additionally, much about system efficiency is about waste management – eliminating the literal and metaphorical unwanted from the organizational system. This is the throughline across vastly different contexts, including lean manufacturing methods and just-in-time production,⁴⁶ the creation and management of relational databases for inventory management, self-enhancement, and home decluttering. Overflowing wardrobes as an overwhelmed organization system is a result of marketing-driven overconsumption further amplified by the aesthetics of spectacle and continuous circulation of desires manufactured by the e-commerce-led influencer culture, which in turn is facilitated by social media platforms. Decluttering becomes popular as a band-aid to temporarily control the excess by transferring unwanted objects outward for someone and someplace else. As suggested in the two opening scenarios, the two case studies in this chapter approach the transference of their decluttered items rather differently: Leighann says dumps bags of the unwanted to a local charity shop for others to manage her trash; Bestdressed turns most of her decluttered items into desirable pre-loved goods to be resold. The difference stems from the fact that the former is a typical fashion lifestyle influencer whereas the latter is a

⁴⁶ Japanese media and platform studies scholar Marc Steinberg's research on the mediations of the Toyota Production System and the material medium of the kanban card in organizing this system demonstrates the mutation of the concept of lean manufacture and just-in-time production from Toyota's automobile manufacturing principles and managerial practices to the governing logic in software design and app-mediated, on-demand delivery services like Uber. For more, see: Steinberg 2021; Steinberg 2022.

sustainable fashion influencer.⁴⁷ There is tremendous diversity among sustainable fashion influencers in terms of how they approach sustainability and ethics (Jacobson and Harrison 2022). Bestdressed's YouTube channel would position her primarily as a thrifting influencer, with most of her videos illustrating how thrifting can be fashionable, affordable, creative, and sustainable. She frequently thrifts and transforms thrifted items through unique styling and DIY alteration as demonstrated in her thrift hauls and thrift 'flip' series. Her approach to sustainable fashion is rooted in the cyclical fashion economy through thrifting, mending, and reselling to minimize unnecessary waste. The juxtaposition of the two case studies demonstrates that waste management in both throwaway culture and circular economy is resource-intensive and often dependent on another chain of undervalued labor.

This chapter brings together theorizations of housework and other forms of cleaning work, materiality of labor, and layered cultural platform work through the analysis of two decluttering videos by Leighannsays and Bestdressed. Tidying labor performed by fashion lifestyle influencers is interdependent with other infrastructural work that remains underexamined in the influencer ecosystem. In this chapter, I analyze the (im)material nature of work required by the influencer ecosystem tracking across private/public and virtual/physical boundaries. The framework holistically considers the production, circulation, consumption, maintenance, and waste of the influencer culture/economy that embeds labor as infrastructure in the everyday operation of digital platforms and commodity networks. Such an approach uniquely

⁴⁷ Ashely, the creator behind Bestdressed, started on YouTube mainly posting thrifting and eco-conscious videos as a college student at UCLA in the late 2010s. She has never explicitly positioned her channel as dedicated to sustainable fashion, but her success heavily leaned on embarking on a more sustainable relationship with fashion via thrifting, alteration, and more conscious consumption. As Ashely's popularity rises and has gotten more sponsorships and partnerships with brands that may not align with the sustainable and ethical values, we see more criticisms and cyber-bullying of her for being inauthentic and a sell-out. Ashely left YouTube without any announcement, with her last video being a New York City apartment tour in December 2020 wherein she recounted a stalker incident. Since then, Ashley has created content on Instagram for different fashion brands.

allows us to capture the complexity of layered digital (im)material labor necessitated by closet decluttering videos as platformized media content in the convergence of lifestyle media, self-help industries, throwaway culture, and content production. In the process of examining closet decluttering videos, this chapter situates social media content creation at the intersection of audiovisual production, mediated performance of self and home, the management of closet/home, and the continuous maintenance of online brand and community across platforms. Vernacular decluttering videos capture challenges that yield discussions of the (im)material tidying and maintenance labor performed by a creator in the management of closet/self, content/community, and home/waste. My approach toward closet decluttering videos adopts Artist Mierle Ukeles's three levels of maintenance (Ukeles 1969)—personal, societal, and planetary—to holistically re-envision what tidying labor encompasses, and hence, become a means to give notice to spectralized forms of labor in the influencer ecosystem. From the process of decluttering to the afterlives of the disposed as trash/donated items/second-hand goods, I use a relational materialist approach toward analyzing seemingly trivial closet decluttering videos as a point of entry for understanding aspects of the influencer ecosystem or, as discard studies scholars (Liboiron 2014) suggest, the wider systems that enable, facilitate, and impact this popular cultural practice with a high yield of waste. As repeatedly highlighted in this dissertation, data, goods, capital, and labor are organized discretely in influencer industry and platform economy to suppress relation and context, which in turn obfuscates the extent of precarity shared across different nodes of a supply chain of labor (Precarity Lab 2019). This chapter adopts cross-module thinking that attends to unexpected, often-hidden relational and material connections.

Attending to the influencer ecosystem is thus also attending to what I propose as the critical concept of “nesting” within the influencer ecosystem. In their article “The Nested Precarities of Creative Labor on Social Media,” Brooke Erin Duffy, Annika Pinch, Shruti Sannon, and Megan Sawey (2021) put forward a nested model toward understanding digital creative precarities and visibility across the levels of markets, industries, and platform features and algorithms. Here, I am more interested in mobilizing nesting as a way of thinking about layered forms of labor in home-centric social media production. A nest is a structure built for certain animals such as birds and small mammals to hold their eggs and provide parental care. Like ‘cloud’ and ‘hive’, ‘nest’ is a biological metaphor that has been mobilized by digital media economy. For instance, Nest Labs was launched to sell smart thermostats in 2010 and later acquired by Google in 2014 to develop and sell smart home devices from smoke detector to home security system. To nest entails more than to settle or rest in a place: it is also to engage in the making and management of a physical or virtual, interior or exterior place, and to be contained within a physical, digital, and social system with hierarchical arrangement. Re-conceptualizing influencer work as nesting unsettles oppositional understandings of (in)visibility, (im)materiality, and interior/exterior. Nesting gestures toward the constant building of home, social media, and self by gathering, arranging, and ridding. The nesting that manifests in closet decluttering videos is grounded in the home but also indicates the material relationships among the domestic, the societal, and the planetary (Ukeles 1969). Nesting reveals the contradictory mechanism of “invisibility within and around visibility” by attending to the layered fluid dynamics of corporeal and affective, creative and menial labor required by closet decluttering videos (Poster, et al. 2016, 11). Investigating how the production of closet decluttering videos nests together different tidying labor associated with disparate sectors from home-based cultural

production to public management of household trash gives us insight into the broader influencer ecosystem. My analysis of closet decluttering videos argues that the organization of data/materials/self permeates across multiple levels and sites like personal wardrobes, office space, digital platforms, and global supply chains, challenging binary categorizations of labor and space.

Premised upon the physical process and result of tidying up, closet decluttering videos provide a venue to interrogate the nested exploitation of platform-driven (im)material labor. My aim to draw out (im)material labor across spatial boundaries speaks to the concept of “boundary resources,” which concerns how a platform instance expands its boundaries inwards and outwards (Nieborg and Helmond 2019, 209). Rather than focusing on YouTube as a platform, this chapter uses decluttering videos to examine the materiality of immaterial labor and the ways online cultural/platform workers depend on other infrastructural workers. My discussion speaks to Duffy et al.’s (2021, 2) framework on how the “nested precarities of visibility” impact social media workers. I extend the discourse beyond the platform ecology to consider how the influencer ecosystem relies on a vast range of everyday operational work. The chapter analyzes the two primary closet decluttering videos by Leighannsays and Bestdressed, especially attending to the rhetorical, corporeal, and affective performances by creators and viewers in these videos and their comment sections. I further contextualize them by bringing in paratexts like Bestdressed’s behind-the-scenes videos, Marie Kondo’s books, and YouTube videos created by thrift store workers. My inclusion of these understudied materials in supplementation of popular closet decluttering videos cultivate a broader consideration of what the influencer ecosystem might encompass and the spectralized forms of labor that are embedded. I find that

closet decluttering videos mobilize three kinds of interconnected (im)material labor: the often feminized and/or racialized work of tidying and managing one's home, content, and trash.

This chapter first presents an overview of the rhetoric and ideology embedded in and popularized by the KonMari Method, and lifestyle media writ large. I then start from the basics, analyzing the process of decluttering as shaped by the gendered history of housework, self-performance, and the maintenance of relationships. What follows is an examination of the work of managing (im)material data as influencers organize closets, produce digital content, and manage their digital selves. Finally, I investigate the labor of waste management during and after the act of decluttering, in and outside the home. Returning to the slippage around immaterial labor and asserting the embodied aspects of these forms of nested tidying labor, this chapter re-materializes the discussion of platform economy and internet culture through a contextualized understanding of digital labor in a range of (im)materiality and (in)visibility.

The Magic and Joy of Tidying Up: From Kondo Production to Vernacular Videos

Magic and joy are two words not normally associated with the act of tidying. They are, however, frequently used in Kondo's how-to books and Netflix shows on decluttering and organization. Magic adds a touch of fun and mystery to the otherwise dull task of tidying up. It makes the often-considered boring, unskilled, and menial labor of housework more appealing. The KonMari method is magical in that one only needs to master two not-hard-to-obtain skills: the ability to discern and keep only items that bring one joy, and the ability to store each item in a place for them to return (Kondo 2016, xii). That is, one will grasp the basics of tidying up once they attune their ability to sense what "sparks joy" and the skill to rate, declutter, and store.

However, the magic of tidying up is not simply a technique; like many other self-help guides, it is branded as an art that requires the merging of the right kind of mindset and skill (Kondo 2014, 5). This can be found in the hybrid how-to and makeover television show *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019): a visual drama that features a conflict that will eventually be resolved through the process of decluttering, leaving each episode with a satisfying happy ending. Tidying up one's home helps an individual clear up other areas of their life and make productive changes. The magic of tidying up exceeds the domestic domain of housework, bringing one joy and satisfying the life-long pursuit of happiness. One must also figure out their ideal lifestyle before starting the process. Kondo conceptualizes a productive performance of the housework of tidying up as needing to be directed by one's aspirations and tastes, which points to the layering of (un)paid gendered labor in the forms of domestic labor, taste work, aspirational labor, and affective labor.

Management and maintenance are essential to every aspect of life and society, yet they often remain spectral (Graham and Thrift 2007; Spelman 2002). Housework, for instance, has historically been seen as women's work; it has also been unwaged, and often deemed unproductive and unskilled. On the contrary, Kondo positions tidying work as skilled and valuable; she also depicts this tidying process as a "once in a lifetime" task that is near magical. The hook is: while her clients went through a strenuous process of decluttering their home that clearly took an enormous amount of work, the long-term result of tidiness requires almost zero work after this process. This mentality diminishes the daily mundane labor, often performed by women in the family to maintain a tidy home. In early 2023, even Kondo herself had given up on prioritizing the goal of always keeping her home tidy, acknowledging the amount of constant work required to maintain tidiness (Koncius 2023).

The notion of magic is also conveyed through a general set of instructions and visualized in the transformation from the overwhelmingly messy initial state to the sparkly, organized final state. *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* is the main visualization and televisual documentation of the how-tos of tidying and organization.⁴⁸ Each episode features a client in the Los Angeles region, their stories of wanting a more organized space, and their process of tidying up under Kondo's guidance. The audience is introduced to short demos by Kondo in each episode that look so perfect, as if we had stepped outside of the cluttered home of the clients to briefly enter a magical realm with Kondo. Kondo's perfect processual representation of step-by-step instructions is visually absorbing and aesthetically pleasing, leaving the audience mesmerized (Skirsky 2020).⁴⁹ As minimalist fashion influencer, A Small Wardrobe (2019) observes that the show often cuts between the tidying process of clients and recordings of "Marie Kondo in Marie Kondo land," which constructs the juxtaposition of Kondo's perfect, proper, and peaceful place in contrast with her clients' excessive, cluttered, and messy places, a binary that will be gradually shattered as the clients go through the process of decluttering over the course of the episode. For spectators, the affect of disgust converts into that of joy. The sense of shared misery/humiliation is also replaced by that of inspiration/motivation.

Indeed, there has been a rising interest in decluttering since *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*'s launch in 2019. Even earlier, many creators on YouTube had started making

⁴⁸ There are pictorial illustrations in the book *Spark Joy* and a manga version of *The Life-changing Magic of Marie Kondo*.

⁴⁹ In *The Process Genre*, Skirsky discusses the appeal and the spectatorial effects of process films in the chapter "On Being Absorbed in Work." I would not say the Konmari method instructions in pictorial and video illustrations are the same as the six-minute film tour of a Crayola crayon factory from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. However, the popularity with the visual documentation of the Konmari method as demonstrated by the Netflix show speak to some spectatorial appeals in viewing decluttering and organizing processes.

decluttering videos based on Kondo's books and other tidying methods such as Swedish Death Cleaning and the Minimalist Game. Some argue that decluttering has become such a popular activity because people have increasingly felt like they are out of control with almost every aspect of their lives, overwhelmed by precarious jobs and unstable economies, exacerbated by economic and public health crises. Decluttering "feels like the one thing [people] can and should be in control of" (Oren 2018, para. 12). Such desire to feel in control amidst all the uncertainties points to the demand for self-help guides in general. The KonMari method appeals to the need to quell anxiety and assert control through the simple promise of "life truly begins only after you have put your house in order," or one's control of self and future is connected to one's control of their home (Kondo 2014, xi). Tidying work thus requires the double performance of affective labor as it both produces and manipulates the affect of joy (Hardt and Negri 2004). On the one hand, joy is a guiding principle for the KonMari method of decluttering; one needs to repeatedly exercise the process of physically holding a piece of clothing in their hands to gauge whether this item elicits any bodily and/or emotional expressions of joy. On the other hand, joy is also the ultimate state of one's body and mind after the tidying up process is complete. The magic of the KonMari method, then, is the appealing self-help idea of the magical making of a new, ideal self through decluttering.

Kondo's multimedia production is part of the long history of lifestyle content that can be found across etiquette books, self-help books, conduct manuals, magazines, advertisements, educational films, radio, television, podcasts, and social media platforms. Since the 1990s, American broadcast networks and cable channels have adopted lifestyle-centered programming that demonstrates the possible bettering of everyone, fitting with the rise of niche marketing in accordance with neoliberal ideology and consumer culture. Lifestyle television invites us to

reinvent ourselves into a specific type of consumer in the existing typology of consumer culture, generating a shared sense of community bonded through consumerist interests and aspirational lifestyles (Ouellette 2016, 5). The countless streaming shows, YouTube channels, Pinterest collections, Instagram and Tik Tok accounts in this current moment of the lifestyle influencer industry, thus, should be considered as an extension of lifestyle programming designed to regulate selves through brands and technological platforms. Kondo's multimedia products demonstrate the glamorization of housework as not only magical and pleasurable, but also extremely rewarding in achieving one's aspirations.⁵⁰

Most user-generated closet decluttering videos on YouTube engage with the KonMari method in some respects. If the KonMari method glamorizes housework and reframes home maintenance as pleasurable and rewarding, everyday decluttering videos, by contrast, capture failure. It is not that people fail at downsizing their belongings by self-implementing the KonMari method. There are many mismatches and gaps that take place in the adaptation of the method, including: failure to follow through all the steps in the correct order; failure to let go or sometimes being too exhausted to make sound assessments; failure to change one's mindset or achieve their ideal lifestyle, which also lapses into the failure to maintain the state of tidiness or contain the quantity of one's possessions (and hence the need to declutter over and over again). Scenario 1 at the beginning of this chapter, drawn from Leighannsays' first closet decluttering video (Leighannsays 2018), exemplifies some of these "failing" characteristics.

Instead of following Kondo's suggestion of piling all her items together to visualize and be confronted by the sheer quantity of one's possessions, Leighannsays simply grabs her shoes

⁵⁰ *Martha Stewart Living* (1993-2005) is an earlier instance of *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019) and *Sparkling Joy with Marie Kondo* (2021) as it "reconceived the feminized labor of homemaking as a pleasurable and rewarding leisure activity" (Ouellette, 2016, 14).

off the shelves one by one. She then moves on to miscellaneous items lying around in her closet. Based on the footage from the second day, we learn that she has an entire shelf in the laundry room full of clothes. While Leighann says is going through clothes from her laundry room shelves one by one and touching every piece, she references Kondo's first book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (2014). The video then cuts to her attempting to pile all her clothes from the closet onto her bed, to "incorporate the KonMari method just a little bit" (06:41). However, she quickly decided that this step was not for her when she has barely started the pile. She does not declutter by category or follow the recommended order, instead jumping between sorting out miscellaneous items in her closet and clothing piles in the laundry room.

Self-help guides like Kondo's books and TV shows are meant for people who think they are falling behind, people who consider themselves as failing in one way or another and want to improve. Everyday consumers of Kondo's content are driven by the desperation of cluttered everyday middle-class American families, and Kondo's ambition in expanding her influence/market to maximize profits through demonstrating that her method works for all families regardless of their race, sexuality, age, and circumstances. It is, however, crucial to question the "zero rebound" claim of the method: influencers and micro-celebrities are not the only ones failing; everyday clients and followers of Kondo also consistently fail to translate and maintain the method. Recently, even Kondo herself has acknowledged "failure," giving up on constantly maintaining her home in order as a tidying guru to focus on spending time with her three children at home at this stage of her life (Koncius 2023). This shift from a professional tidier reveals the large amount of spectralized labor behind aspirational home maintenance, and that keeping one's home tidy at all time is an unreasonable expectation.

Fashion lifestyle influencers tend to be driven by the aspiration to present themselves as having a put-together closet/home with an organized aesthetic. The aim is to make their channels more relevant and popular by sharing their processes of engaging with a trendy cultural activity, and the desire is to perform oneself and connect with followers through settings that are deemed more intimate and authentic. The “failures” in Leighannsays’s video point to the (im)material labor performed to maintain her home/closet and her digital community/brand as a female lifestyle influencer. Closet decluttering as a housekeeping activity expresses one’s aspirations to improve an unsatisfactory life. At the same time, the public mediation of closet decluttering by internet celebrities analogously maintains one’s digital brand and community. Leighannsays’s wardrobe clean-out video points to the intersection of housework, taste work, aspirational and relational labor to be discussed in the following section. Decluttering videos simultaneously function as a space of commiseration, nostalgia, connection, and monetization. The monetization will allow for more acquisition of consumer goods that will lead to the vicious cycle of more clutter followed by more decluttering. The affective maintenance of an online presence and community as an influencer rely on and are mediated through the physical performance of decluttering as housework.

Performing Housework, Self, and Intimacy

Female-identifying creators predominate as authors of YouTube decluttering videos, a genre conforming to the historical tendency for women to perform domestic labor. Leighannsays (Scenario 1) repeatedly states that she is neither good at nor enjoys doing tasks like organizing and cleaning. The video appears to challenge the compulsion to be a good housewife and the sense that women perform housework because, per the normative sexual division of labor, they

are naturally good at it. As Leighannsays (2018) states, “[tidying up] does not come naturally to me on any level” (00:37). Nonetheless, the gendered association of housework persists here and beyond as professional and ordinary lifestyle media tend to feminize domestic work, promising to help women manage their home with greater efficiency and style (Ouellette 2016, 103) and discover the joy of domestic work despite it being a second shift of labor. For (aspiring) full-time influencers, the production of a closet decluttering video allows for some overlaps between their first and second shifts of labor.

Connecting with audiences is another expected yet unpaid component of influencers’ work that is often considered an investment in audience growth. Baym (2015) refers to it as relational labor: the free labor influencers undertake to communicate with their audiences and to form and maintain relationships that could lead to some form of compensation. Creating connection through imperfection and vulnerability requires affective as opposed to expert labor. A closet decluttering video confesses “the real,” containing humiliating/shameful revelations that are highly gendered—addictive consumption and messy housekeeping. It often involves publicly sharing one’s flaws alongside the excitement/pride of completed decluttering, to convey different affects like shame, surprise, distress, and joy. Rather than demonstrating how to declutter, Leighannsays establishes an emotional connection with her viewers around struggles with home management. The online-mediated audiovisual documentation of closet declutter transforms time-consuming, mundane, physical housekeeping work into an affective performance featuring “live” housekeeping struggles that adds to a creator’s layers of performed authenticity (Abidin 2018b).

Race plays a discursive role here concerning simultaneous Orientalism and techno-Orientalism, as Leighannsays started off her declutter with the KonMari method but was quick to

dismiss it, in turn establishing her realness against Kondo's perfection. Orientalism is a strategy that visually and materially consigns Asia and Asian bodies to be represented by traditional imagery and decorative objects. Rather than decorating their homes with pre-modern Asian ornaments, one version of the new Orientalist home centers the ideal of practicing the KonMari method of home management symbolized by a display of Marie Kondo's books. Techno-Orientalism concerns the West's simultaneous fascination with and fear toward Asia's technological innovation and manufacturing capability. The techno-Orientalist gaze futurizes Asia into a high-tech dystopian zone, rendering Asian bodies as factory machines without personhood or humanity (Roh et al. 2015). There is a clear techno-Orientalist binary present here: Kondo—the Japanese tidying expert—is set up as unreal and too perfect like a housekeeping machine, in addition to her media content acting as Oriental household ornaments desired by middle-class American women. In contrast, Leighannsays—the white American influencer—is seen as an authentic human who struggles, makes mistakes, but ultimately overcomes. These racial and cultural dynamics need to be further discussed in relation to the histories of American domestic labor and media. As media scholar L.S. Kim demonstrates in *Maid for Television* (2023), the racialized domestic servant has been central to the American television history as an invisible yet essential figure to the white middle-class family economy.

Leighannsays's video presents a paradox in its introduction: preemptively warning the audience about the mess and challenges ahead while promising a happy ending of successful clear-out as shown by the massive donation pile. By exposing her messy, vulnerable self, Leighannsay hopes her video may inspire others like her, who are not good at tidying up, to attempt decluttering. The video's comment section confirms that this approach of imperfection builds relationships with Leighannsays' followers through sharing (content production) and

engagement (replying to comments). Figure 15 shows how Leighannsays has been fostering and co-creating “communicative intimacies” that are personal, commercial, and material with her followers (Abidin 2015). Influencers in highly gendered categories such as fashion and beauty “practice a feminine labor that hinges on commercial intimacies” concerning shared material interests in clothing and make-up items (Abidin 2015).

Closet decluttering videos tend to foreground personal and material intimacies while backgrounding commercial intimacies. For example, Leighannsays infuses material fashion objects with her memories of herself and/or others. Looking at comments left by viewers of Leighannsay’s video affirms the critical function of memories and the amount of intimacy work in closet management, content creation, and community building. Comments by longtime followers Sarah Southcott and Jess Rose establish a personal intimacy between them and Leighannsays through their shared recognitions and memories tied together by certain articles of clothing (“that shirt! That dress!!”). Viewer Tessa S. further notes a “vicarious closet nostalgia” and hence, shared personal intimacy with Leighannsays, established through the material intimacy of owning the same piece of clothing and a commercial intimacy—a consumerist sense bonding (Banet-Weiser 2007)—that implies Tessa S. purchased this item due to Leighannsays’ influencer marketing.

Figure 15 also suggests that a closets’ intimate storage space hosts both physical clothing items and nostalgic/aspirational experiences. While I will relate closet decluttering videos to data organization and management later in this chapter, I am attending to the double intimacies of wardrobe and YouTube/Instagram as archives of time and memory for creators whose personal and work life are heavily documented and integrated into their social media presence. There are pieces of clothing like the black dress she wore to her graduation that ooze sentimental memories

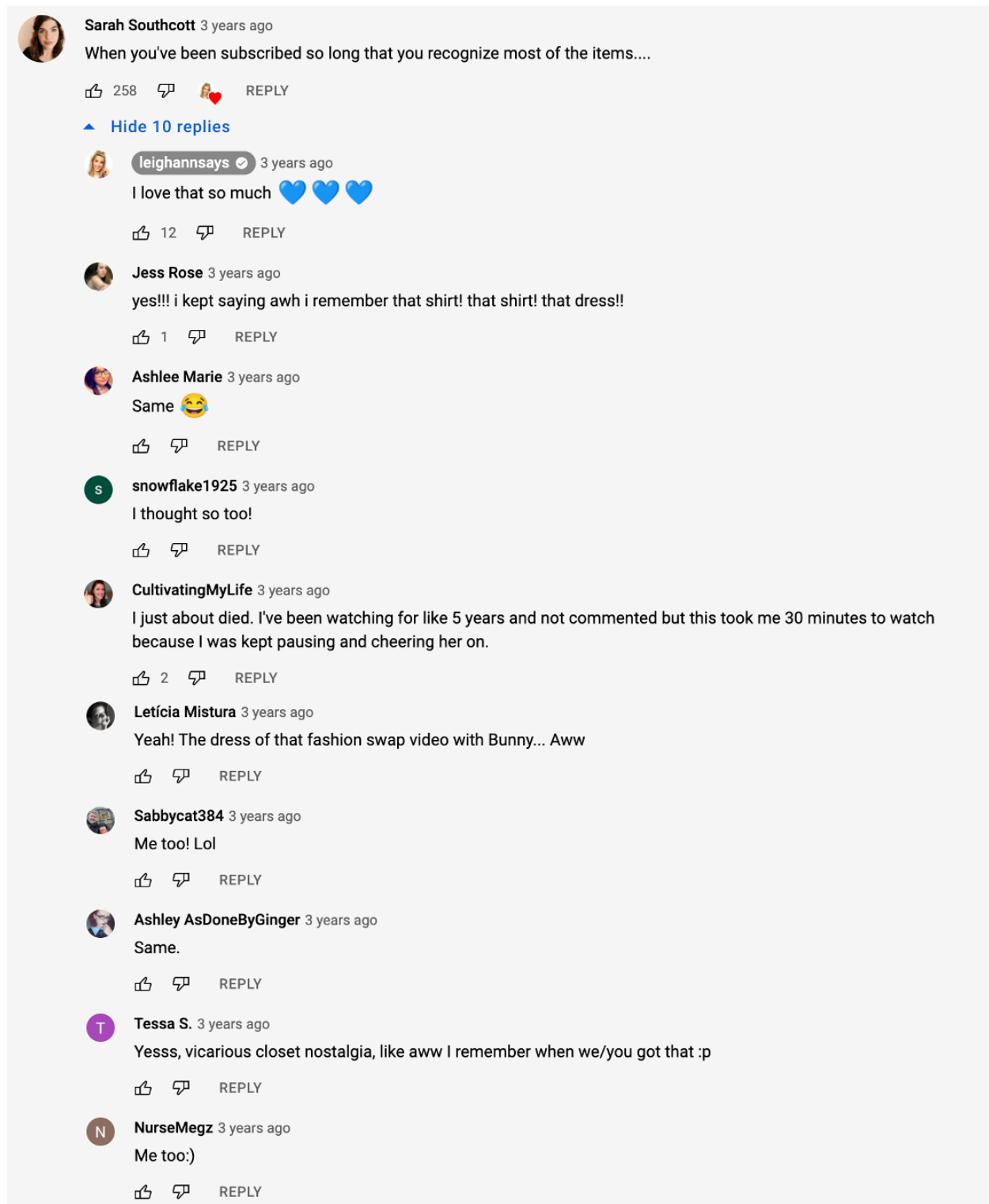


Figure 15. Sample comments under Leighannsays' video (Leighannsays 2018).



Liz Gibson 3 years ago

When you held up the black dress I said "That's what Leighann wore to graduation!" It shows how long I've been watching! Also, I saw a sweater in your donate pile that I bought because you looked so awesome in it. You wore it on your trip to Santa Fe (cream chunky knit/distressed). I also bought the shoes you wore with that. Oh, Leighann... how you inspire me!

👍 11 🔁 REPLY

Figure 16. A sample comment under Leighannsays' video (Leighannsays 2018).

from Leighannsays' everyday life and her career journey as an influencer, as seen in Figure 16. In the same comment, long-term follower Liz Gibson also voices their interwoven intimacies as elicited by seeing a sweater in Leighannsays' donation pile that they also own. They clearly identify the commercial and material intimacies shaped by Leighannsays' "cyber-femininities"—Leighannsays' portrayal and performance of herself as mediated via the social media—and their homo-social desires (Abidin and Thompson 2012). Such double intimacies mediated by wardrobe and social media also speak to how digital and imaging technologies aid in the production of affect and capital in influencer media. As suggested by Elizabeth Wissinger (2007), the production of images not only serves a role in directly selling products but also produces bodily affects and intangible feelings in adherence to capitalist productive strategies. Thus, it is crucial to consider the form and content of closet decluttering videos as both documents and catalysts of affect in late capitalism.

In a sense, material objects in the closet and the typically domestic work of tidying them up perform and elicit relational labor from both creators and followers. Discarding unwanted pieces and reorganizing pieces to keep on video visually solidifies a material and affective transformation that is fundamentally enabled by the mundane yet challenging physical and emotional labor of housework. While aspects of housework are captured and made visible, the sheer presence/visibility of domestic labor does not necessarily reveal the conditions under which that labor is performed. I contend that the disembodied and hyper-performative

interactions on social media platforms, such as the truncated audiovisual rendering of closet decluttering, and the self-help emphasis on lifestyle aspirations, mendaciously dematerialize the time-consuming, labor-intensive, and highly affective (im)material work of housekeeping.

Leighannsays's closet decluttering video presents her decluttering process in vlog form with edited clips and added voice-over. The representation of the process starts with capturing and exposing the often shockingly messy initial stage. We see a huge closet with hanging racks and shelves all messily packed and the floor covered with shoes with barely any surface to walk on. Unlike the typical staged-looking, color-coordinated closet photos on Instagram and Pinterest, the visual documentation of this environment reflects an aesthetic of messy excess; that is, excessive in terms of the sheer volume of possessions, and messy concerning the state of these possessions. The voice-over adds to the aesthetic of excess as well. It does not record Leighannsays' live thoughts during the decluttering process but, rather, her voice that is added later contributes extravagant comments, reactions, and feelings toward these images of her space and her performance in this space. One can sense the embarrassment and feeling of being overwhelmed: "It is so embarrassing. There is just stuff everywhere. Nothing makes sense. [...] There is not an inch of space, no organization whatsoever. It's just packed with stuff I didn't want anymore" (Leighannsays 2018). Here is guilt and frustration: "Look at these bags. That is horrible. I deserve no bags when I am storing them like that" (Leighannsays 2018).

This overstated performance of guilt and embarrassment also exudes a sense of showing off that comes with her privilege as a middle-class white American woman who can afford to continuously accumulate large quantities of items that are rarely used. Notably, these negative feelings emphasized by Leighannsays are less related to owning too much than whether her possessions are presentable, a common concern shared by those in the middle class who aspire to

emulate the taste and standards of life enjoyed by the leisure class.⁵¹ Wardrobes not only store time and memory, but also archive and express personal tastes, trials and errors, dreams and aspirations. Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 27) famously argued that “the idea of personal taste is an illusion;” that is, personal taste never originates with the individual but is always socially constructed. One’s personal taste is shaped by one’s social class, context, and aspiration; it in turn materializes through expressions of that self, such as styles of dress, home aesthetics, organization, manners and speech. These expressions of taste require one to exercise forms of self-classification, which end up classifying one within a particular “habitus,” or system of sensibilities and values (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, 6).

The expression of personal taste, and by extension, of oneself is core to influencer work and lifestyle. Self-fashioning, posing, styling, making videos, editing photos, and writing captions and blog posts are all common practices of taste work that turn an influencer’s styles into an increase in their cultural status and monetary value (Pham 2015, 5). The creation of closet decluttering videos practices various modes of taste work such as discussing aspirational lifestyles, discarding pieces that no longer fit, and documenting the transformation. These videos disclose how taste can be messy and inconsistent even if an influencer’s Instagram page suggests otherwise. Influencers must constantly edit and maintain their belongings, manners, activities, and social media content to present a coherent taste that is supposed to be consistent with their self/brand. As Minh-Ha Pham (2015) suggests, taste work is a value-producing activity that generates social, cultural, and financial capital for the influencer, and more importantly, different

⁵¹ In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen (1899) traces conspicuous consumption as a function of social class and of consumerism emerges from the feudal period and evolves to the modern day. The leisure class is one stratum composed of people who only do unproductive activities and are exempted from manual work. While ownership is a big part of the leisure class, its material consumption has little to do with comfort but emulation of property, capital, wealth, importance, distinction, respectability, esteem, status, and social standing.

entities in the fashion industry, and relevant industries in beauty and lifestyle. Closet decluttering videos reveal influencers' taste labor located in the process of tidying up and, at the same time, encourage viewers to also be inspired and work toward their aspirational lifestyle.

Most influencers must perform unpaid domestic labor, like decluttering and organizing, to keep their home tasteful. That is, taste work is not just creative, affective, and inspirational; it is also material, physical, and instrumental (Pham 2015, 7). Closet decluttering videos are one such site where taste work intersects with labor in the domestic sphere, often known as women's work. Not being recognized as work, housework has been transformed into a "natural" attribute of women that is therefore "a labor of love" and does not require a wage in this patriarchal society (Federici, [1975] 2012). Ouellette (2019) builds on discussions on women's labor in the home, proposing that Kondo's promise of greater well-being through tidying up and curated consumption fails to acknowledge its dependence on women's work.

The disembodied interactions on social media platforms, the audiovisual renderings of the closet decluttering process, and the self-help emphasis in lifestyle aspirations all dematerialize the time-consuming, labor-intensive, and highly affective (im)material work of housekeeping. Further, this dematerialization constitutes a prerequisite for the realization of any closet decluttering videos. The appeal of Leighannsays' video lies in its affective dimension, which unfolds through the physical process of tidying up. The relational work of building communal connections via this video is grounded in the materiality of overflowing closets and the time-consuming physical/emotional work of managing material objects, home/closet space, self-imagery, and digital community. No closet decluttering video exists without the *physical* process of clearing out and reorganizing one's wardrobe, but this dimension is often obfuscated by the videos' tendency to center and estheticize affective operations from struggle to joy.

Although the materiality of decluttering is on the screen, affective rhetorical and bodily performances guide attention away from the mundane physical work toward the more entertaining expressions of emotion.

The self-help discourse—that home maintenance is pleasurable/rewarding if one’s inner and physical spaces are connected (Kondo 2014)—dematerializes and depoliticizes housework, deflecting from its identity as outrageously unwaged women’s work (Federici [1975] 2012). The neoliberal economy attracts people to do-it-all, including the doubly unwaged work of tidying up and producing decluttering videos. Further, this housework-as-self-help discourse builds on but is not self-aware of the racialized, classed histories of domestic work. In the system of American racial capitalism, legacies of slavery and immigration have fundamentally shaped understandings of women vis-à-vis workers. Black women and women of color have historically performed a disproportionate amount of labor outside their own homes as domestic workers taking care of the homes and children of others. As Davis (1981) notes in *Women, Race and Class*, “housework is a fluid product of human history,” with its definition, values, function, and range being era/geography/status specific. While housework most commonly refers to the daily work routine of the middle-class/upper-middle-class housewife, most Black women post-emancipation worked as waged domestic labor in a white woman’s home, while concurrently performing unwaged housework in their own home. The same goes for working-class and poor, immigrant women who must work outside of their home as waged labor in domestic and other industries.

In the decluttering wave, the KonMari method has been popularized in place of outsourcing housework to waged domestic workers of color. Cleaning and organizing aspects of housework are undertaken by the unwaged housewife under the free guidance and/or paid consultation of celebrity tidying experts widely circulated in lifestyle media. The manual work of

cleaning is framed as serving the personal pursuit of happiness. Joy is also the ultimate post-declutter state of mind. The KonMari method and closet decluttering videos on YouTube magically conjure a new ideal self through the physical process of reassessing and reorganizing clothing items. This disposal-centered process, however, also heavily relies on the outward transferal of housework, leaving a large portion of the cleaning and sorting work to nontraditional domestic workers in public spheres. The rest of this chapter illustrates the nesting of un/paid home-based work that includes housekeeping, social media content creation, and independent secondhand retail along with waged labor performed by sanitation workers and thrift store workers. Closet decluttering videos offer a way into conversations of social reproduction theory, a Marxist feminist methodology that integratively theorizes labor in both public and private spheres to “interrogate the complex network of social processes and human relations that produces the condition of existence” (Bhattacharya 2017, 2). The next two sections show how vernacular media objects can illuminate layered operations of the influencer ecosystem drawing from labor and resources across sectorial and spatial boundaries.

Managing Closet, Content, and Self

Decluttering is tightly connected to the notion of convenience, which, first and foremost, is about efficiency. It is a distanced and abstract way to talk about efficiency in “unproductive” settings as a counterpart of production efficiency in the manufacturing workplace. Since the early 1910s, the notion of household efficiency, adapted from the Taylorist management system, has been widely disseminated into the American, middle-class domestic sphere. Lillian Gilbreth, an American industrial management specialist and organizational psychologist, applied industrial management principles to domestic management and home economics (Strasser 2000). The *Ladies' Home* journal, one of the leading women's magazines of twentieth century America, was

advocating principles of scientific management in the home and the advent of “visiting housekeeper[s]” in their October 1912 issue (Rutherford 2003, 44). Christine Frederick, then a housekeeping expert, popularized the means to productivity via planning and consumption in a column for the *Ladies’ Home Journal* and in books like *The New Housekeeping: Efficiency Studies in Home Management* (1913) and *Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home* (1919). Purchasing newer domestic technologies and better organization systems represents a form of investing in progress, luxury, and alleviation of the burden of housework. Decluttering is the other side of the same coin, promising a future with minimal housework once people discard the unnecessary and set up the right kind of efficient storage system.

For fashion influencers working with clothing items, a wardrobe functions as a storage container for their what may be considered “work data.” However, an overstuffed closet, like any overloaded system, yields prolonged retrieval times and missing items. Closet decluttering enables a reassessment and reorganization of one’s material knowledge and storage. Influencers can discard the unwanted and recast what remains for optimal productivity in their closet system.

⁵² This section extends discussions of tidying labor beyond housework, as wardrobes straddle home/office spaces for fashion influencers while closet decluttering videos integrate management of closet/content/self. Production of wardrobe clear-out content mobilizes the (im)material process of sorting, cleaning, and reorganizing clothing items in one’s home, plus the (im)material work related to content production and management through steps of pre-production planning, content filming, video editing, social media posting and engagement.

⁵² In the specific context of makeup decluttering videos, many creators articulate that they still keep certain ‘classic’, ‘iconic’, or ‘once popular’ products they no long actively use in their “archive” so that they can compare newer launches to these benchmarks.

Fashion/lifestyle influencers regard their closet as an active home- and workspace for the presentation and transformation of self. Closet decluttering physically imbues this space with knowledge and memory of the past, coupled with an aspirational logic for the future (Makovicky 2007; Mattern 2017). Physical wardrobes and digital platforms function as archives of both past memories and future aspirations, with a compound temporality that extends from creators' expressions of taste/self through the management of closets/social media. A closet archives and expresses personal tastes as shaped by one's social class and aspirations. Content creation (including self-fashioning, making videos, editing photos, writing captions, and blog pieces) enhances personal taste to maximize cultural status and monetary value (Pham 2015, 5). Closet decluttering videos mobilize various modes of taste work like the vocalization of aspirational lifestyle, disposal of non-fitting or unwanted items, and visualization of one's transformation. They document and catalyze the continuous process of regulating and expressing selves via the planned management of one's possessions and spaces.

With the dominance of fast and disposable fashion mindsets, the middle-class of the Global North can easily amass an overwhelming amount of clothes. A fashion influencer has extensive knowledge of – or the ability to form an educated opinion about – a piece of clothing. An influencer's closet decluttering video enables a reassessment and reorganization of their “database” of material knowledge. They can discard the unwanted and recast what remains for optimal productivity and in response to current trends. Key concepts in the KonMari method—including sorting by categories and dedicating space for each item—for the ease of retrieval of objects at home connect to the “cabinet logic” (Robertson 2021, 105) of filing cabinet that relies on interior partitions to classify, index, and store items and information for enhanced efficiency. Kondo's recommendation for vertical storage to ensure the visibility of each stored item is

situated in discussions around verticality as an organizing strategy for maximizing space and time utility (62). Like a filing cabinet's role in a traditional office is designed to facilitate often-female clerks with paper management (199), a closet's role at home is to assist the – again often-female – housekeeper with household management (223). Leighann says declutters due to the need to make room for her fiancé to access his clothing items conveniently and efficiently once he moves in.

Bestdressed lives on her own and uses her closet as a central workspace, making it hard to discern the motivations behind the clean-out with the blurring of domestic-and-public, leisure-and-work. Her closet decluttering video (Bestdressed, 2019a) demonstrates a version of home-office integration in the overall context of work-life integration that illustrates the “nested precarities” (Duffy et al. 2021) of home-based work via the management of household, workplace, and content. Closet decluttering goes beyond the tidying up of the designed wardrobe space to include varying spaces in the home like desk drawers, make-shift racks, and the floor, all of which are repurposed as extended storage for fashion items in the tiny apartment where Bestdressed lived and performed housework, influencer work, and schoolwork. Bestdressed's wardrobe clean-out can be seen as an attempt at space/work/life management to increase productivity and balance within the reality of one integrated home-office space. The massive decluttering leaves her with office desk drawers that can be used for actual office purposes, more living floor space that is not taken up by shoes, a less overwhelming amount of clothing items to choose from for work, a huge pile of clothes to be sold online, and five hours of footage to edit for her channel. Fashion and lifestyle influencers who operate closets using scientific home management methods hope to maximize temporal and spatial efficiency of their closet to focus

on the more valued work of content creation, speaking to the devaluation of the work of managing and maintaining household technologies/systems (Robertson 2021, 224).

The pursuit of happiness and fulfillment via decluttering depends on strategies that improve housework and workplace efficiency on a material level. The making of closet decluttering videos mobilizes home management tasks, requiring the devalued physical process of sorting, cleaning, and reorganizing clothing items in one's home. Scenario 2—Bestdressed's closet decluttering video and its paratexts—performs necessary (im)material work related to content production and organization through steps of pre-production planning, content filming, video editing, and social media management. This section foregrounds how a wardrobe clean-out video contributes to the continuous management of self. It does so by managing both physical objects and digital content as varying forms of home/office space for, and private/public information about, the self.

Trained as a film student at UCLA, Bestdressed adopts an auteur-like approach toward her social media content creation. Currently boasting the most viewed closet decluttering videos on YouTube, Bestdressed's video has unusually high production values for this usually imperfect, unpolished genre. The video presents a one-woman show that weaves together a single-cam TV comedy with self-help lifestyle talk show and outfit try-on demonstration. Bestdressed treats this closet decluttering video like any other content, consistent with her overall artistic vision in filmic esthetics and self-deprecating humor. She does not shy away from stylized edits that could be considered inauthentic. Rather, her stylistic devices enhance her self-expression. If the camera documents her corporeal and vocal self-performance, she uses the *mise-en-scene* and editing techniques one learns in film school to highlight/enhance certain qualities of herself.

Bestdressed's video speaks to a kind of work-life integration/regulation that mobilizes the layered, home-based managing labor. After a brief title sequence, Bestdressed (2019a, 00:07) addresses her audience, standing right in front of her closet: "So I have this running joke when people come to my apartment that I literally live in a gigantic pile of clothes." A quick montage follows her posing with a wardrobe full of clothes, a section of floor covered in shoes, a portable clothing rack of jackets, under-bed storage overflowing with sweaters, a bedside cabinet of intimate wear, and an office desk filled with clothes. She justifies this massive cleanout in a series of point-of-view shots that each intentionally center different clutters of clothes. The fast-paced montage cuts across visuals of mess and clutter, as the narration reiterates what we are seeing: "clothes on the floor, clothes that I need to fold, clothes that I need to wash, clothes that I need to put back in their space in the closet, clothes that I need to hang up" (01:07). The shots are physically and mentally overwhelming in their visualization of the work that needs to be done. This cinematic call-to-action reflects Kondo's argument for inner-outer connection, and how bettering one's surroundings betters oneself. Bestdressed clears out more living space, reorganizes her closets with only useful and joyful items, and feels a corresponding change of mindset. She also generates hours of audiovisual footage for content (this section) and piles of clothes for her independent secondhand retail business (to be addressed in the next section).

Management/maintenance work form a large part of content creation, which involves moving back-and-forth across planning and development, staging, filming, editing, and audience interaction. Bestdressed takes on multiple production roles, including performance, producing, scripting, directing, cinematography, and editing. She also performs many feminized and racialized forms of production, clerical, and service work—set and prop, makeup and hair, costuming, publicity, development, scheduling, and cleaning. Any creator must take on a wide

range of physically and mentally demanding roles, whether they are considered creative or not; central or peripheral. Through a massive amount of embodied work, Bestdressed continues constructing and regulating her style/image/brand/self via the production of audiovisual and written content. She carefully crafts the video's style and relatability through the camera work, mise-en-scene, editing, sound, narratives, and word choices. Furthermore, creators' work also include the management of their content, often using a content management system and/or a digital asset management system to manage the creation, storage, access, delivery, and optimization of digital media content across different platforms. This section thus centers backstage work and tactical labor (Abidin 2016; Goffman 1956), under-visibilized work that appears effortless in digital content production. Borrowing from Taylor's (2018) map of layered livestream productions and Johnson's (2021) typology of "off-camera labor," I assert that closet decluttering video productions involve layered spectralized work performed by fashion lifestyle influencers concerning esthetic construction (personal styles, wardrobe esthetics, and photo/video visuals), relationship building and maintenance (with followers, collaborators, brands, and sponsors), and mundane managerial tasks (self, closet, content, home, and waste).

Engaging her viewers in the comment section, Bestdressed discloses that she sorted through five hours of messy footage to produce this tightly edited, eighteen-minute decluttering video. That "messy footage" represents five or more hours of (im)material performance, whether she is talking through, trying on, or posing for pieces. This labor does not include the countless hours in pre- and post-production, taking Instagram photos (Bestdressed 2018a), editing photos and planning for her Instagram feed (Bestdressed 2019b), and editing YouTube videos (Bestdressed 2018b). The steps in content creation are highly time- and resource-intensive, and thus, workflow efficiency is extremely important. Filming a closet decluttering video requires

coordinating the process of filming with that of decluttering. There is the taxing process of planning an extensive wardrobe cleanout: what the criteria are, what the goals are, where to start, how to proceed, and what to do with the decluttered items. An efficient filming process demands planning: crafting a script, identifying primary shooting locations, creating a storyboard with key stylistic elements, setting a filming schedule, making a shot list, and scheduling voice-over recording, etc. Even a short closet decluttering video requires complex organization of physical clothing objects and varying digital media assets.

If the filming process documents Bestdressed's embodied performance of closet decluttering, the postproduction editing process materially realizes her creative visions through manipulating recorded footage. Bestdressed's how-to video on editing (Bestdressed 2018b) describes a pared-down version of her steps, which include examining all the footage and compiling a rough cut (which, in her words, "takes fucking forever"), listening to possible music on SoundCloud for audio backgrounds, making a backup file with all the pre-selected data saved (so that she would not need go back to the unsorted pile of raw files as she continues editing), syncing images with music and voice-over, adding visual effects to "spice up the video," color correcting, and assembling the introduction/title sequence. She discloses that the making of the title sequence—putting together an overview clip with a few highlights from the already edited body of the video and adding a designed title to it—took around an hour. One can only guess that the previous steps of organizing and perfecting the content would each take longer than that, yielding at least ten hours spent on editing, and at least fifteen hours on filming and editing this eighteen-minute-long closet decluttering video.

After that, she must take care of the management and publicity of her content/ self: uploading the video, crafting a video description and publicity materials, and engaging with

viewers on YouTube and other platforms. This work relates to the (im)material labor previously discussed concerning the building of connections and intimacies. In this case, the often-considered immaterial, relational labor concretely involves additional (im)material work. To fulfill the request from viewers wishing for more footage of her decisions regarding each piece of clothing [Figure 17], Bestdressed reworks a new version of the video on her second channel Bestmess. The comment posted by viewer Sophia M focuses on an emerging sad affect as she views the time-lapse footage, elicited by an absence of the more intimate interaction afforded by extended talking clips. Yet such sentiment of sadness significantly dissipates in the thread, with followers translating their affects and desires into demands for a “director’s cut” with “no time lapse” that is an “unedited [. . .] long ass video” for the Bestmess channel. The seventeen-minute long bonus video (Bestmess 2019) consists of more footage that was fast-forwarded in the original video; it is also a compromise, significantly shorter than what the enthusiastic followers were requesting. How Bestdressed manages closet/content/self demonstrates that she routinely constructs the (in)visibility within labor as an A-list influencer via her decisions on what is and is not seen by the public (Poster et al. 2016). Such rendering is the under-discussed (im)material work of data management, content production, and the digital self/brand.

Ultimately, analyzing closet decluttering videos through the managerial lens positions the work of decluttering in the context of fashion and lifestyle influencers as a form of maintenance of home, office, and self. Housekeeping is the work of running a household and maintaining a livable, efficient, and presentable space for a family and oneself. For a fashion and lifestyle influencer, tidying up one’s closet is maintaining not only one’s home but also one’s workspace and brand/digital self. The work of home management, or unpaid housework, has been paradoxically understood as both leisure and work at home (Patton 2020, 74). A closet

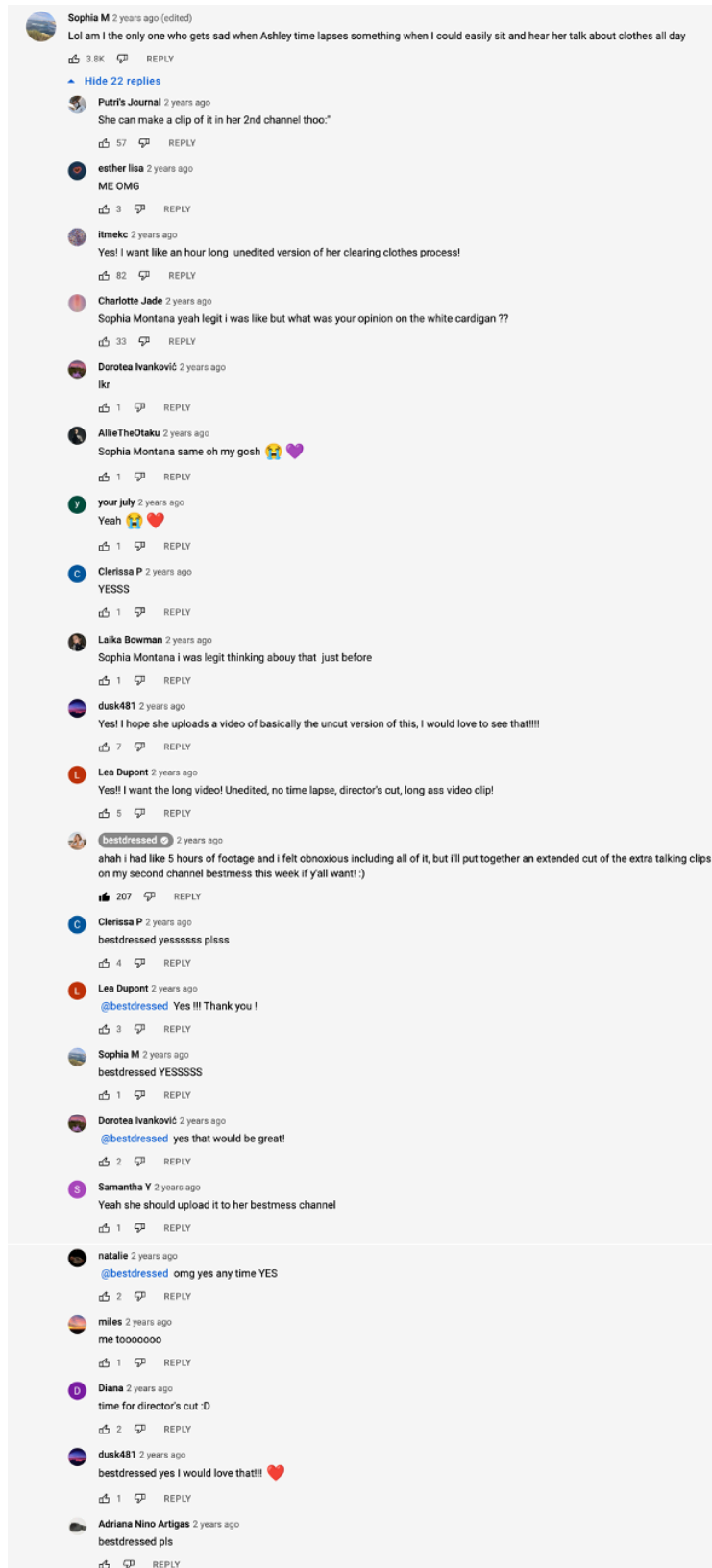


Figure 17. Popular requests in the comment section of Bestdressed (2019a).

decluttering video, as a part of the larger home-based influencer economy and digital production, is an epitome of the fusing of play/work. The labor of tidying up closets and sharing that process on the internet is feminized as leisure and devalued as menial. Closet decluttering videos, and influencer media more broadly, are situated at the intersection of work, play, and consumerism in the continuous seduction of the live-work lifestyle, initially promoted by popular publications such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* in the 1960s (Patton 2020). This section addresses how closet decluttering content creation relies on home-based home/office/content management work, shaping physical wardrobe items and digital content materials into public content and digital selves. The subsequent section further extends outside of the home, considering how the domestic genre of closet decluttering mobilizes nested labor in sectors under-discussed vis-à-vis influencer media and platform work.

Managing Waste In and Outside of the Home

In *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2001), Mary Douglas demonstrates how dirt and waste are not natural nor fixed but “the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter” shaped by and grounded in the broader cultural system that prescribes relations with an order (36). Wardrobe decluttering, as an act of sorting, actively creates trash. As Strasser (2000) states, “sorting and classification have a spatial dimension: this goes here, that goes there. Nontrash belongs in the house; trash goes outside.” Insofar as “home” maintenance, online or off, requires an output of garbage, the waste is transferred to service workers to be recycled as goods and/or processed for disposal. Leighann’s video starts with footage of herself talking, focused against a blurred background, wherein we see piles and piles of clothes. It cuts to handheld phone footage that reveals purged items in “the donate piles.” Such piles, understood as the victory of the closet decluttering process, will be offloaded to a local Goodwill. Kondo brands

her onetime big declutter as repair work that will fix one's problems by alleviating the social issues and familial tensions clutter represents. The self-help industry mobilizes domestic labor as a necessary component of the dream of living clutter-free and, hence, problem-free. It advocates discarding and disposing as essential to the repair and maintenance of one's life.

The process of self-discovery is centered and hyper-visualized through the documentation of closet decluttering steps, speaking to how one's organization and presentation of self is deeply implicated in how they manage their material reality (closet and waste in this case). Indeed, "styles of waste disposal are also styles of self" and "waste management, in all its cultural mutations, is fundamental to the practice of subjectivity" (Hawkins 2006, 4). Popular closet decluttering videos on YouTube by fashion lifestyle influencers like Leighannsays and Bestdressed encapsulate how the everyday presentation of self requires a constant alignment of the ways one manages their home/office, digital content, and material possessions/waste.

Decluttering videos also tend to sensationalize the excessive amount of stuff one is parting with, often communicated via visual-auditory excitement and pride toward the quantity of thrown-away or recycled items. Leighannsays' emphasis on the quantity of the 'donate' piles resonates with how closet decluttering content often features a quantity of trash bags. Popular images of excess visualize the power of socioeconomic class differences; whether something counts as garbage depends on who's counting. It is common to see trash bags full of perfectly good items that may be out-of-style or with which the owner is bored. This cycle of excessive clutter and decluttering is ultimately a metaphor for deeper inequalities in American society and global consumer capitalism. Notably, there is an absence of interest in the afterlives of these decluttered items and the amount of household waste generated through decluttering activities that must be processed by other waste workers.

Waste management demands creativity and labor. It results from capitalism's planned obsolescence that generates profits by mobilizing fast-paced disposal of owned goods as a precondition for purchasing replacements (Strasser 2000). Kondo (2014) defends against throwaway by emphasizing the "need to [. . .] not be distracted by thoughts of being wasteful" (p. 41) and "the real waste is not discarding clothes you don't like but wearing them even though you are striving to create the ideal space for your ideal lifestyle" (p. 70). Performative acts of gratitude, like thanking the clothes before throwing them out, mask and excuse the act of disposal, disregarding environmental consequences of irresponsible clothing dumps. Such mindfulness discourse offers a guilt-free path toward a better life by taking away one's responsibility to this larger interdependent world. It instills unidirectional, extractivist thinking that encourages people to consider only how the keeping/disposal of objects can (im)materially serve themselves.

Closet/life tidying increases intense demand and workload for maintenance labor outside the domestic sphere, such as circular fashion labor and public waste management. If media plays such a big role in constructing wants, it can also be a site of providing alternative perspectives to the logics of disposability. Sustainability and labor discourses around circularity and waste on social media platforms are important paratexts to consider as they can re-articulate relationships between everyday practice and waste on a micro-scale, mitigate external agitation of desire, and offer an entry point toward a more complex understanding of societal discard. Examining Bestdressed's closet decluttering video in relation to her how-to video on selling clothes online draws out connections between the (im)material maintenance of one's personal home, public spaces, and digital self/storefront. As a popular sustainable fashion influencer, Bestdressed performs multiple forms of tidying labor; she collects, cleans, repairs, and resells in cyclical

fashion, a sustainable practice that aims to maximize the life of a garment before reaching the end of its lifecycle to minimize unnecessary waste. How Leighannsays and Bestdressed manage their decluttered piles sheds light on waste management labor delegated to others in the former case or performed by oneself in the latter case. Both are required, yet often rendered invisible.

Waste management is work-intensive yet it often takes place in the background; workers take care of waste offloaded to them by others. Thrift stores are well-known as sites that rebrand discarding as donating for the middle-class to get rid of their cast-offs conveniently and guilt-free. YouTube content created by thrift store workers (Aaliyah 2019; Porcelain 2018) disclose that the most physically demanding labor in secondhand retail—sorting, hanging, and tagging—occurs in the warehouse invisible to the customers, and further, the embodied manual labor of cleaning the sales floor and reorganizing racks is mostly ignored. Porcelain, a makeup influencer and a thrift store worker, recounts numerous instances wherein the thrift store receives donations of literal household trash (e.g., a handbag filled with food debris). Thrift store workers and public sanitation workers, hence, care for the afterlives of (un)resolved household waste. During Mierle Ukeles’ research-creation with the New York Sanitation Department in the 1970s, a male sanitation worker once stated: “Do you know why people hate us? They think we are their mother. They think we are their maid. I can’t pick up after 100,000 people.” The quote captures the naturalized bias that women, paid or unpaid, should manage the interior home and deserve to be disrespected. It attests to how maintenance work in and outside of home is feminized, devalued, and ultimately disregarded by the society.⁵³

⁵³ The work of tidying up is also commonly considered as a form of punishment in and outside of the home: kids are often tasked to wash dishes or sweeping the floor if they misbehave; incarcerated people are exploited as free laborers through the community service program to pick up trash.

Bestdressed released a sequel to her closet decluttering video, demonstrating how she sells the decluttered half of her closet and manages her online secondhand store (Bestdressed 2019c). Her huge closet declutter performs the preparatory work to generate secondhand merchandise. By selling decluttered items online, Bestdressed takes on the work of waste management and prevention to find a new home for each piece of decluttered clothing still in good condition. She thereby presents a way of handling decluttered “waste” that requires significantly more work than just discarding it all at a charity store or dumpster. This paratext presents decluttering labor as listing labor, “the taste and responsibilities of selling,” in the digital secondhand economy (Kneese and Palm 2020, 1). An essential step in this process is to capture and display the secondhand merchandise online. Bestdressed translates pre-owned physical items into visual and written information to convince customers of their value. She models and photographs each article to include varying details and angles. Thorough descriptions are crafted to account for the item’s condition, relevant tales, and styling potentials. Bestdressed develops a system of sorting/pairing to maximize the efficiency of the very time-and-labor-intensive photoshoot. She models/photographs items by category to minimize outfit changes and adjustments of the camera. She also sorts dresses by length to minimize the need to move the camera and reframe. The photoshoot alone takes a day, even with this efficient workflow. Next comes listing and cataloguing. Bestdressed imports all the photos into her computer, uploads 3-5 photos per items onto the retail platform, comes up with titles and prices, and types up descriptions, which include the size, brand, condition, flaws, quirks, and, sometimes, styling tips or what types of event this item might be worn at.

As an influencer and manager of a small independent e-boutique, Bestdressed promotes and manages her relevant declutter, thrift, and resell activities on social media as her digital

storefront. She also coordinates “sales platforms and other logistical media to manage inventory, facilitate transactions, and arrange shipments” (Kneese and Palm 2020, 1). Bestdressed’s established influencer brand/community carries over to the publicity and popularity of her shop. All items are sold out within hours of being listed, but it takes Bestdressed a whole day to pack orders. She starts by weighing each item on a kitchen scale and creating the shipping label online using secondhand sales platforms’ in-app services such as Depop and Poshmark. With more than a hundred orders to ship, Bestdressed opts for Shipstation, a subscription-based logistical service integrated with her Squarespace-powered storefront to generate shipping labels, saving her from the work of manually entering a large quantity of shipping addresses. After printing out all the shipping labels, she handwrites a brief thank you note on the invoice for each customer, continuing the (im)material relational labor of strengthening connections and intimacies. She then packs items into empty envelopes and boxes and, subsequently, attaches each shipping label to its correlating package. Lastly, Bestdressed loads these hundred-plus packages to her car and drops them off at a post office.

Listing labor, as demonstrated in Bestdressed’s video on online retail labor, is mundane, (im)material work that is foundational to managing the decluttered as secondhand circular fashion. Digital platform listing labor is embodied as traditional retail work, “always performed by workers situated offline, while on the bus and in line at the post office as well as in more formal worksites” (Kneese and Palm 2020, 3). Featuring a large quantity of decluttered clothes, shipping labels, and items packed in shipping supplies, the video exemplifies what Kneese (2021, 4) refers to as “logistics fetishism.” Bestdressed’s online retail how-to video reveals the success of her business while making visible often-hidden (im)material labor and resource-intensive processes essential to the operation of online retail and digital platform economies. As

demonstrated, the process of turning the decluttered from trash into desirable second-hand goods mobilizes a multi-layered, multi-step system of managerial work across home-based content production, digital asset management, and retail logistical management. Paratexts of the two scenarios shed light on the obfuscated labor of managing the afterlives of the disposed in and outside of home, online and off. The framework of an influencer ecosystem invites us to ask: What does influencer work encompass? Who are and can be considered influencer economy workers? What kinds of work are rendered invisible? Closet decluttering videos may not give us the direct answer, but they leave clues about the disregarded.

Conclusion

This chapter foregrounds three interconnected forms of tidying labor in closet decluttering videos: management of home, content, and waste. I dissect layers of digital (im)material labor as tidying and managerial labor essential to the production of closet decluttering videos to propose an inquiry that considers the materiality and relationality of vernacular media objects. Influencer media texts matter contextually, offering insights into the ostensibly seamless operation and effortless maintenance of the influencer ecosystem. This chapter unveils some relational-material entanglements embedded in and enabling closet decluttering videos that may not be self-evidently connected but are all operating under the same field of labor. I highlight how lifestyle media, like closet decluttering videos, depends on, dematerializes, and capitalizes the highly corporeal and affective (im)material aspects of housework and relational work in constructing and maintaining the digital self. Housekeeping and content creation in this chapter are both home-based work that also mobilize labor and infrastructure exterior to one's home. These videos mobilize varying types of tidying up of oneself via the handling of one's physical and virtual surroundings. Closet decluttering videos

require layers of overlooked managerial work to organize material articles in one's domestic space, produce/manage multimedia creation, and construct/amplify one's digital existence. We are then reoriented from the (im)material labor of wardrobe clean-out content production to that of the personal and outsourced handling of the decluttered's hereafters as goods and trash in the interior and the exterior.

This chapter unpacks the three-pronged nesting of a digital self and influencer community via the management of closet, digital content, and waste. Nesting works together with the framework of the influencer ecosystem I am utilizing for this dissertation, opening up discussions of varying obfuscated (im)material labor and infrastructure in the broader influencer media production workflow and digital economy. Examining lifestyle media like self-help guides and closet decluttering videos in this chapter sheds light on how managerial logics and often-invisible feminized work are mediated and operationalized through popular media texts and digital cultural production. These nodes and layers are part of the larger network and chain of spectralized forms of labor in the influencer culture and creator economy.

Notes on the Influencer Ecosystem

Inspired by historically significant manifestos like the *Combahee River Collective Statement* and *A Cyborg Manifesto* as well as more contemporary ones such as the *Digital Precarity Manifesto* and the *Feminist Data Manifest-No*, I want to share a few notes and takeaways on critically engaging with platform-mediated influencer culture and economy.

The influencer ecosystem expands our typical understandings of who and what count toward the influencer industry and influencer work.

Many of us might think about marketing, attention, fame, and profits when we think of influencers. These are not wrong, but the influencer culture and economy do not equate influencer marketing. Social media influencers, marketers and advertisers, brands and businesses, and targeted audiences are not the only participants in this ecosystem. This dissertation argues for a more holistic approach that considers contributors and types of work outside of the typical bound of social media marketing industry. Even within the creative and cultural industries more broadly, many types of work are left out of the conversation of the influencer economy. Unnamed motion capture actors and stand-in models, for instance, are not in the general discussion of labor and the influencer industry albeit being absolutely essential to the production of computer-generated influencers as discussed in Chapter 1.

The home and the vehicle are key locales for the construction of authentic selfhood, and hence, where different productive activities take place. Home-based piecework has been widely acknowledged by scholars as essential to the digital economy (Kneese 2021). In considering the

layered forms of labor going into the popular decluttering phenomenon online and offline in Chapter 3, we see the mobilization of housework and home management work, relational work and affective labor, and waste management and disposal work in relation to the work of content creation and media management. I unpack how closet decluttering video production nests together (im) material tidying labor associated with disparate sectors from home-based platform cultural production to public management of household waste shed lights on imbricated operations of the influencer ecosystem.

Scholars have also explored the tendency for social media creators to use their personal vehicle for vlogs to capture their psychological interiority in performing authenticity in this liminal space (Bollmer and Guinness 2024). Despite the centrality of commodity sales and goods circulation in influencer-centric social media economy, few creator scholarships engage with logistical laborers such as delivery drivers, whose work vehicles serve a very different purpose for the influencer economy. In Chapter 2, I center on delivery drivers as key infrastructural laborers in the influencer economy by looking at how the idea of logistics is being spectaclized in e-commerce advertising in relation to the hidden presence of delivery drivers in the backdrop of unboxing videos as well as vlogs created by logistical workers as aspirational influencers.

The influencer ecosystem covers much wider ground that I am able to engage in this project. I invite us all to consider how we and people around us are actively and passively contributing to the burgeoning influencer ecosystem. Whether we like it or not, there is no denying that we are increasingly subsumed in influencer culture and economy as ordinary internet users, consumers, creators, and workers in the current iteration of platform-centric, attention-driven capitalism. The mid-2010s to early 2020s was an early moment in the development of the influencer economy at the intersection of advertising and social media

cultures. It is a matter of time before more forms of work have to implement influencer practices and more types of labor are performed as infrastructures to the influencer economy. This transition period is thus a critical time for us to reflect on and contend with how our labor is mobilized by the influencer-centric platform economy to benefit corporates, platforms, and elite individuals high up in power structure. Continuous observations of the expanding influencer ecosystem will inform us more of this updated phase of capitalist growth logics and patterns.

Spectrality helps us better understand the material relations obfuscated in the complicatedly nested systems and networks in digital economy.

Why does it matter to have an expansive understanding of the influencer industries and the types of work involved? Why shall we care about the systems and networks of laborers feeding into the operation of the influencer ecosystem? Because we are all part of it. The digital media/advertising industry wants us to focus on the online celebrity aspect of the influencer culture, the glitz and glamor of elite influencers, the sensational translation from platform data to financial profits. Many are led to believe in the neoliberal discourse of social media's role in equal opportunities and successes, aspiring to move up the mobility ladder one day in the near future. Others like to think of influencer media as a form of entertainment and that they themselves are far from embedded in the machine of influencer economy. But if we really pay attention to various aspects of spectrality, from hidden and peripheral labor to gendered and racialized dynamics, in popular influencer media texts, we can gain a much better understanding of the material realities and relations that make possible the flourishing influencer culture and economy. Specters occupy liminal spaces like the backgrounds, shadows, margins, and off-screen spaces. To grasp the extraction, exploitation, and subsumption of the influencer industries

demand us to see beyond/through the facades of seductive spectacles to reach the specters and their foundational role in actively and/or passively supporting the influencer ecosystem and, by extension, this current iteration of influencer-centered platform economy. We need to develop a kind of spectral vision and sound to counter how we are led to indulge in digital content in mindless, habitual ways as designed by social media platforms and algorithms. Can we resist being sucked into the habit of media-binging what we are fed, and instead, break out of the algorithmically pre-determined streak to make a better sense of the material relations across what we consume and produce? Can we see beyond the spectacular façade to confront our place in this extractive system of digital capitalism? Adopting a kind of spectral awareness as we engage with influencer media can help us avoid being completely subsumed under the advanced capitalist logics and lose sight of the material reality. Centering specters of the influencer ecosystem helps reveal how power operates and is experienced, and potentially, speak truth to power undergirding influencer-centric digital capitalism.

We can move toward building solidarity across workers in the influencer ecosystem.

As demonstrated throughout this project, the current influencer-centered platform economy exploits racialized, gendered labor along the supply chains of physical commodities and information production to maintain existing structural inequalities. Exacerbating conditions of precarity and exploitation have yielded more labor activities. Social media influencers and creators have begun to come together through trade associations, with the establishment of organizations like the Internet Creator Guild, the American Influencer Council, and the Creators Guild of America (Edwards 2024). In 2021, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) has opened membership to creators via the

Influencer Agreement that allows anyone producing influencer-generated branded video/audio work with their individual social media platforms to be covered by the Hollywood labor union. In the same year, Black TikTok creators went on strike to protest the lack of credit they receive for their creativity and original viral content. Two years later, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and SAG-AFTRA went on strike in 2023 over a labor dispute based on issues around streaming media residuals, and the use of generative AI, among others. Many studios enlisted social media influencers and creators as alternative means for film promotion and for replacement of striking workers. Moreover, the research on pre-AI computer-generated virtual influencer production in Chapter 1 showed key concerns surrounding the industry's pursuit of risk management through digital avatars, as well as the precarity of body and voice doubles as disposable, undervalued proxy laborers. With wider application of generative AI and digital recreation technologies, there are heightened concerns regarding how these new technologies will be used in service of corporations at the expense of influencers and creators. In my future research, I will further investigate specters in generative AI influencer production.

Beyond the creative industry, we have witnessed more labor actions and unionizing efforts across sectors in manufacturing, logistics, and retail in recent years. Low-wage, immigrant garment workers in downtown Los Angeles, for example, have been working with the Garment Worker Center to eliminate sweatshop labor, fight for fair wages and better workplace conditions, and demand accountability from factory owners, manufacturers, and brands. Amazon workers at different warehouses have attempted to unionize in the early 2020s: Workers at a facility in Bessemer, Alabama organized the very first union election at an Amazon warehouse in 2021; the Amazon Labor Union was formed in 2022 by winning a historic union election in Staten Island, New York at a facility known as JFK8. Simultaneously, retail service workers at

Starbucks and Trader Joe's have attempted and sometimes successfully unionized while facing intense interference and violations of workers' organizing rights. As suggested by this research, many people who perform labor seemingly unrelated to the influencer industry, including logistics, home management, and retail workers, are integral to the operation of the influencer economy. By recognizing different spectralized forms of labor in the influencer ecosystem and drawing out the entanglements between them, this dissertation ultimately lays the groundwork for building labor solidarity across sectors and industries under the impact of creator economy and platform cultures. To further advance this work, my future plan is to incorporate a participatory, self-reflexive mode of ethnography to engage with a wide range of creators and varying workers who may or may not consider themselves as workers in the influencer industry, and to learn more about their positionalities on the influencer ecosystem and the possibilities of cross-sectorial labor solidarity.

I would like to end this project by acknowledging the academic labor performed by myself and the many scholars and researchers of influencer and creator studies, and that we are workers in the influencer ecosystem. Similar to the aforementioned industries, higher education is witnessing a strong wave of unionization and organizing efforts, especially from adjunct lecturers, postdoctoral researchers, and graduate student workers. As I am wrapping up this dissertation to complete my doctoral knowledge production that supposedly brings new insights to how we can grapple with the influencer culture and economy, I am also embarking on a new chapter as a precarious adjunct professor continuing my pursuit with a sense of cruel optimism: juggling to teach varying classes at different universities and colleges while trying to make advances in my research and hoping to secure a more long-term job in the near future. In future

work, I will seek to bring more observations on building solidarities with other workers in the influencer ecosystem as an academic worker in the field of influencer and creator studies.

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