The London School of Economics and Political Science

The Platformised Creative Worker

An ethnographic study of precarity and inequality in the London influencer industry (2017-2022)

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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Abstract

Building on the recent proliferation of scholarly interest in the impacts of platformisation on the Cultural and Creative Industries, this thesis draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the London influencer industry (2017-2022) to examine the sociocultural, technological, and commercial contours of labour for social media content creators. Within this context, I ask which creators are able to gain visibility and success, and conversely who is systematically excluded from opportunities, and why?

As a digital anthropologist, it is through immersion in the everyday contexts of creators' lives, in seeing them interact both online and offline and hearing them describe their experiences, that I seek to understand these dynamics. To this end, the project combines several ethnographic methods: online participant observation, offline participant observation, ethnographic semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography in the form of becoming a YouTuber myself. In framing these micro ethnographic insights within macro structures of power and intersecting inequalities, this work seeks to make an original contribution to the literatures on influencer cultures and the platformisation of creative industries and labour.

Shifting patterns of employment in the Cultural and Creative Industries away from stable structures, and the emergence of the *neoliberal worker-subject*: entrepreneurial, flexible, self-directed, always available to work, has been the topic of much academic scrutiny since the 1990's. This research found that the labour of content creators bears many of these hallmarks, and yet platformisation has given rise to novel formations, concerns, and challenges. This thesis makes the case that the *platformised creative worker* marks an intensification of the neoliberal worker-subject, with content creators facing heightened conditions of both precarity and inequality. In their search for sustainable careers in an unstable emerging industry, creators must spread their labour thin across multiple platforms and revenue streams, all whilst obsessively scrutinising their popularity metrics, performing taxing relational labour, and navigating opaque algorithmic recommendation systems. Further—and contrary to highly celebratory discourses that position social media creation as more diverse, inclusive and meritocratic than legacy cultural industries—not only are certain creators subject to long standing discriminations, but we can identify new forms of structural inequality emerging. In the influencer industry certain identities, expressions and types of content are propelled into the spotlight whilst others are cast into the shadows of obscurity, mapping onto well-worn inequalities of race, class, gender and sexuality. This is an advertising-driven industry that makes visible the most profitable creators, those who do not disrupt the neoliberal status quo: white, straight, male, middle class, cisgendered, *brand-friendly*. Overall, this thesis argues that platformisation has significant implications for creative labour and contributes to ongoing debates about the future of work and the impact of technology on contemporary forms of employment.

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CHAPTER 1

Broadcast yourself: The techno-utopian roots of the influencer industry

The arrival of the technologies known collectively as Web 2.0 brought with them much excitement, viewed as a challenge to "Big Media" and providing people with direct access to one another and to new tools for creativity and activism (Marwick, 2013, p. 22). YouTube was no exception to this optimistic mood: as a website populated with "user-generated content"—or "media content produced by amateurs, outside of the traditional creative industries" (Burgess, 2011, p. 311)—it was seen as the antidote to traditional broadcast media's stranglehold on audiovisual production and distribution. In the popular press, revolutionary rhetoric abounded, exemplified by the famous 2006 *Time* magazine issue, in which the author writes "For seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, Time's Person of the Year for 2006 is you" (Grossman, 2006).

This was when I first discovered YouTube culture, and I quickly became swept up by the techno-utopian zeitgeist. It was 2009 and I was 19 years old, living at home and working full-time at a bookshop in my hometown of Bristol, England. Most of my friends had recently left the city to start degrees or go travelling, so I was on my own a lot. I became engrossed by watching people in other parts of the world, mostly the USA at that time, sharing their lives through the screen. In 2009, my feed was filled with comedy skits, parodies, challenges and music videos from the high-profile creators of the day: Jenna Marbles, Smosh, NigaHiga, charlieissocoollike, iJustine, Rhett and Link. Beyond YouTube's more famous microcelebrities, I often gravitated towards vloggers[1] who sat in their bedrooms and talked about their lives, hobbies, opinions and beliefs. I felt a strong sense of connection and intimacy with a particular set of creators: The Vlogbrothers, MeekaKitty, MemeMolly and fiveawesomegirls, all of whom were part of the broader and thriving Harry Potter fandom, with which I identified at

[1] Vlogger is a portmanteau of "video" and "blogger".

that time. After a few months of being an avid watcher, I took YouTube's tagline to "Broadcast Yourself" to heart. I wanted to make videos too, to connect with and befriend the creators I had been watching, understanding the platform primarily as a place for online community rather than a passive source of entertainment or a way to make money[2]. I uploaded videos about all manner of topics in 2009-2010, talking about my favourite books, TV and music, documenting trips with friends, and discussing my dreams for the future. The whole experience made me feel empowered and like I was part of a new and exciting underground movement.

Figure 1: Time magazine cover, December 2006 issue

[2] Since Google acquired YouTube for $1.65 billion in November 2006, they have been developing and fine-tuning new models for attracting advertising revenue through the platform, commodifying the vast attention economy of the site (Wasko and Erickson, 2009, p. 374). Including amateur content creators in their revenue generating efforts, Google launched the YouTube Partner Programme (YPP) in December 2007, which enables member creators to monetise their content through pre- and mid-roll adverts on their videos. However, in the late 2000's the YPP was only available to a very select group of creators and other forms of income generation had not yet emerged, so the majority of content creation was recreational.

Some scholars, too, hailed a paradigmatic shift in communication due to Web 2.0 in the late 2000s, celebrating the rise of "participatory culture" and the emancipatory potential of new technologies for engaged "prosumers" (Toffler, 1980)[3], with audiences now "demanding the right to participate within culture" (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 24; see also Jenkins, 2006b; Leadbeater, 2007; Shirky, 2010; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). But this triumphant mood gave rise to powerful critiques, especially from political economists, who were concerned with the operations of power and addressed such issues as free labour online (De Kosnik, 2013; Fuchs, 2014; Scholz, 2010; 2013; Terranova, 2000), data collection and targeted advertising (Andrejevic, 2009; Morozov, 2011; Postigo, 2016; van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009), and the increasing co-option of online space by a corporate neoliberal agenda (Banet-Weiser, 2011; Couldry and van Dijck, 2015; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013; van Dijck, 2009; 2013; Wasko and Erikson, 2009).

In the context of the Cultural and Creative Industries, Hesmondhalgh argues that the pervasive "digital neophilia" that has permeated much of the discourse on technological developments over the past three decades, for example the fervent myth that platforms have heralded the democratisation of cultural production, serves to further obscure operations of power. As he puts it:

> The internet and world wide web were being framed by powerful individuals and institutions as democratizing, life-enhancing forces in culture and communication, but at a time when neo-liberalism, marketisation and commodification were in fact *inhibiting* the realisation of their emancipatory potential. (Hesmondhalgh, 2002/2019, p. 265)

For Hesmondhalgh, this contradiction is fundamental to understanding recent developments in the Cultural and Creative Industries, at a time when "collective misplaced optimism [regarding digital transformations] can blind us to potential dangers, problems and abuses" (Ibid., p. 263). Indeed, not only can such optimism blind us, but it can also work to calcify

[3] This is the idea that the 1970s transition to information-based economy marked an increase in consumers being brought into the process of production, leading to "a welcome degree of customisation and individualisation" (Hesmondhalgh, 2002/2019, p. 266).

problematic formations of power and exclusion. Gill argues that the widespread myth of egalitarianism in cultural work itself becomes a key mechanism through which inequality is reproduced: the post-feminist sensibility that "all battles have been won" renders inequality increasingly difficult to speak about, let alone challenge (2014, p. 109). This contradiction is fundamental to the argument presented in this thesis.

1.1 The rise of Social Media Entertainment

I have been deeply invested in YouTube culture and the broader creator economy as both a fan and researcher ever since those early days of social media, but a lot has changed. Over the past decade we have witnessed the meteoric rise of social media platforms as they have become core to the generation of popular culture and the practices of daily life, and concurrently the emergence of a new category of celebrity: the influencer. What began in the 2000s as pockets of amateur creators has grown into a booming creative industry, dubbed by Cunningham and Craig as "Social Media Entertainment" (2019), built upon a now relatively mature infrastructure of diverse and competing platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook Watch and Twitch, that combine online video and social networking affordances with opportunities for industrious self-appointed "content creators", or "influencers", to generate revenue. Whilst influencers come in many forms, from Insta-famous fashion gurus modelling on impossibly beautiful beaches, to dynamic gamers interacting with their livestream audiences on Twitch, YouTube and Facebook, one thing is clear: the thought of channeling one's social media passion project into a fulfilling career is alluring for many. These are jack of all trades entrepreneurs within a highly competitive industry, simultaneously videographers, editors, photographers, on-screen talent, brand ambassadors, merchandise producers, marketers, and PR reps, or at least they are until they become successful enough to hire a team and delegate some of the labour.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the categories of "influencer" and "content creator" and define our terms. In her 2008 book *CamGirls*, Senft coined the term "microcelebrity", which she defines as "the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same" (2013, p. 346). Building on Senft's earlier work, Abidin defined influencers in the mid-2010's as:

> Everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blog or social media posts. (Abidin, 2015)

Abidin's definition of "influencer" is inflected by the case study that informed it, namely the highly feminised and professionalised "lifestyle" genre that her female participants in Singapore inhabited. But there are many genres of content in the creator economy, both mainstream and niche, including gaming, fitness and health, educational, social and political commentary, beauty and fashion, food, challenges, and music, to name just a few, many of which are less associated with the feminised label of "influencer". Indeed, the term was concocted and is primarily utilised by the social media marketing industry to appeal to advertisers, and is a label that most digital producers eschew publicly in favour of the less commercially inflected "content creator", a catch-all term someone working across any genre and with any level of followers or income.

Bishop (2021b) provides a fascinating rumination on this lexical distinction. As she notes, "influencer" and "content creator" are essentially two labels to mean the same thing: "They both involve the independent, serial production of content for social media platforms", and both are renumerated in similar ways, through a combination of platform revenue, brand deals and crowdfunding. The question she asks is "Why, then, are they made to sound like different things?" Her answer, and I tend to agree, is that the term "influencer" is most often associated with female fashion and beauty creators, containing within it sexist undertones of vanity, narcissism and commercialism, whilst "content creator" is more masculine, someone who makes art, and evokes "creativity… a word softly humming with warm, positive connotations". As she puts it:

> Influencers are regarded as fundamentally commercialized, with any creativity and agency drained from their practice, while creators appear as the inverse, only incidentally commercialized because of the appeal of their creative agency.

> Influencers are seen as trading in the calculated depiction of an "authentic lifestyle," while "creators" are held to a different standard of realness in representations, affording them flexibility and more opportunities. (Bishop, 2021b)

As Bishop describes, the different stakeholders in the creator economy—platforms, creators, social media marketers and talent agents—thus leverage these terms for strategic ends. Social media platforms highlight their "creators" in hopes to "obfuscate their exploitative reputations through celebrating their productive creativity". Producers tend to avoid the label "influencer" in audience-facing contexts to appear more "authentic and unsponsored", instead seeking genuine connection and intimacy with viewers. Talent agents and social media marketers, therefore, take on "the commercial relationships that influencers want to avoid publicly managing… happy to promote and sell influencer to brands". In other words, these labels *do* something, and are used to enact power by different people, in different ways, at different times. In this thesis I use both designations, reflecting the self-titling practices of my participants: most used both labels and chose between one or the other depending on the audience, more often than not using "influencer" strategically to appeal to brands and "content creator" in most other contexts.

Whether someone titles themself as an influencer of a content creator, brand partnerships are the most lucrative and commonplace form of income for professional producers working in most genres in the creator economy. The influencer industry is sustained primarily through this kind of marketing, a sector that has grown exponentially from $1.7 billion in 2016 to $13.8 billion in 2021, with an anticipated increase to $16.4 billion by the end of 2022 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022a, p. 10). In addition to brand deals, creators also monetise their content through a combination of advertising revenue, platform creator funds[4], viewer subscriptions[5], crowdfunding[6], merchandise sales, public appearances, and providing a host of other services and products for a fee. As this list suggests, the ways in which creators can be paid for their

[4] As is the case with TikTok's Creator Fund, whereby rather than offer creators a proportion of advertising revenue (as YouTube and Facebook Watch do), the platform has a fund that is shared out daily between eligible creators on the platform based on a variety of criteria, including number of video views (TikTok, 2022).
[5] On platforms with paid-for subscriptions, such as Twitch and OnlyFans.
[6] Crowdfunding can occur both in-platform—as is the case with YouTube Sponsor—or via third party platforms and services such as Patreon, Venmo and Cashapp.

work has proliferated over the past years, with platforms adopting a variety of business models to attract and connect influencers and advertisers. In 2022, more than 50 million people considered themselves to be content creators globally, and the creator economy was estimated to reach a total market size of $104 billion (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022a).

As the second most popular website in the world, with over two billion logged-in users each month, 500 hours of content uploaded every minute, and over one billion hours of content watched daily across more than 100 countries, YouTube holds a dominant position in the social media landscape (YouTube for Press, 2023). According to Ofcom's 2022 *Children and parents: media use and attitudes report*, in the UK YouTube was the most widely used site for children, with 90% of 5–17 year-olds using it to watch videos, more popular than Netflix or live television (Ofcom, 2022). YouTube leads not only as a destination for viewer entertainment but also for freelancing creatives seeking to build careers as social media personalities. Poell, Nieborg and Duffy argue that in terms of reach and revenue, other video sharing platforms such as Twitch and TikTok remain in YouTube's "hulking shadow" due to the powerful "network effects" in play, wherein an increase in viewers, advertisers, and creators makes the platform more valuable to each of the other groups, thereby perpetually inflating all three (2021, p. 4).

Elite influencers with multiple millions of fans can attract huge incomes; according to Forbes the top 10 highest-paid YouTube stars of 2021 earned a combined $300 million (Brown and Freeman, 2022). The average age of influencers has gone up as the original generation has aged, but this is a decidedly young industry; most successful content creators are under the age of 35, with two of the top earning YouTubers of 2021 under the age of 10 (Ibid.). The spectacular success stories that are so visible across social media platforms and in journalistic representations of influencers add to its allure as a viable career option and this new industry has had a particularly profound impact on the ambitions of young viewers; the *Drawing the Future* report based on a survey of over 20,000 British primary school children in 2018 found that *social media and gaming* was the 4th most popular career aspiration amongst 7-11 year olds in the UK, and that "for more and more children and young people online celebrities and YouTube gaming vloggers have taken the place of TV and movie stars" (Chambers et al., 2018, p. 19).

1.2 Two myths about the influencer industry and two research questions

Despite the highly commercialised nature of the influencer industry in 2023—and the myriad critiques of techno-utopianism over the years—the idealism of early Web 2.0 continues to strongly shape popular understandings of content creator labour. In line with Gill's findings from research conducted in cultural industries as diverse as web design, radio, film and television post-production, computer games, and advertising (2002; 2010; 2014), I found widespread discourses about the *autonomy*, *freedom*, *openness* and *meritocracy* of social media creation. Crucially, the influencer industry is represented as having these qualities to a *greater degree* than legacy cultural industries. Two powerful myths emerge time and again in the discourses of platforms, journalists, talent managers, social media marketers, and oftentimes content creators themselves, which encourage droves of (mostly young) people to try to build careers in the influencer industry:

(1) Social media content creators have great *autonomy and freedom* as creative workers; they can work when they want and however much they want, create whatever they want, accept or reject brand deals and other income generating offers at will, and can reach giddy heights of fame, success and wealth, governed only by their ability to attract an audience.

(2) Pathways to success are *far more open and egalitarian* than more established creative industries, such as film and television, publishing, theatre, design and fashion. Creative individuals are not confronted with the usual gatekeepers on their way up the ladder—line managers, commissioning editors, executive producers, directors—determining their suitability for opportunities, contracts and income and setting the disciplinary boundaries of their labour. So "anyone can make it" (Duffy, 2017) as a social media content creator if they just have enough talent, determination, and an entrepreneurial spirit. In the absence of these barriers to entry and progression it is championed in the industry that *talent will meritocratically rise to the top* and therefore creators from historically marginalised groups, such as BAME, LGBTQ+, female, disabled, and working-class people, now have an equal platform to speak,

represent themselves and earn money in ways not previously afforded. Thus, *online content is more diverse and inclusive* than the more established Cultural and Creative Industries.

Having been trained in critical feminist and political economic traditions of media and communications, I was naturally suspicious of these claims. Is being a content creator as glamorous and fun as it seems? And does the influencer industry really lack the barriers and discriminations that plague legacy Cultural and Creative Industries? It struck me that these perceptions are largely based on representations of elite creators, who make up a tiny minority of the whole, for example with 85% of all views going to only 3% of the channels on YouTube (Bärtl, 2018, p. 16). Despite the huge number of people trying to break into this industry, research into the experiences of small and aspiring entrepreneurial content creators is sparse. The emphasis in both popular representations and research on successful full-time creators, as opposed to the vast majority who are struggling to gain traction and income, fails to reflect the nature of work that most content creators face, the noteworthy exception being Duffy's research on "aspirational labour" (2017), discussed further in the next chapter. As being a content creator has grown into a viable career for some, and an aspiration for many more, it has become pressing to understand the lived realities of those working in this industry from top to bottom, not only the privileged few who have "made it".

And so, animated by a desire to understand the lives and working conditions of content creators across a wide spectrum of experiences, beyond public perceptions and industry discourses of elite creators, this thesis is driven by two research questions:

(1) What are the distinctive sociocultural, technological and commercial structures that shape the experiences of content creators working in the burgeoning influencer industry?

(2) Which creators are able to gain visibility and success, and how are certain groups and types of content systematically excluded in the influencer industry?

1.3 Life and labour in the influencer industry: An ethnographic journey

And so, nearly a decade after I first became invested in YouTube culture, in September 2017 I embarked on a voyage as a newly minted PhD researcher with an ambitious goal: to gain a holistic understanding of the lived experiences and labour content creators working in the influencer industry, from amateur creators just starting out all the way up to highly professionalised elite creators. The ways in which a researcher approaches a new object of study is of course informed by their disciplinary background, and ingrained as I was with the training and sensibility of a cultural anthropologist, I knew from the outset that the nature of my inquiry demanded long-term ethnographic fieldwork with content creators, seeking to gain a nuanced understanding of the world from their points of view, the "world" in this case consisting of the London-based and online influencer industry.

Thus began a five-year ethnographic journey, the most intense period of data collection occurring, by design, in the first two years of the project between February 2018-September 2019. As planned, my fieldwork encompassed a wide spectrum of entrepreneurial creators, from attending London Small YouTubers meetings, a community organisation for small creators carrying out seemingly endless unpaid labour, to "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) in various green rooms, backstage spaces and highly secured hotel bars at major industry events in London and California, in which elite A-list influencers with multiple millions of fans mingled with one another and prominent industry professionals. Understanding social media as a dynamic ecology, I conducted online fieldwork across a plethora of social media platforms, voraciously consuming the media produced by content creators, watching their videos, reading their posts, and observing their interactions with audiences. With the goal of accessing the embodied and experiential dimensions of creator labour, I carried out a year of autoethnography, becoming a YouTuber myself, an illuminating and humbling experience. 30 creators became key participants, with whom I carried out semi-structured interviews in addition to interacting with them during fieldwork (detailed in *Appendix 1*). In the process of data collection, I came to adopt the term "community-industry" to describe the ambivalent persistence of the language of community in a decidedly commercial-industrial context (O'Neill, 2018, p. 3). In line with findings of previous cultural industries research, in the

influencer industry the boundaries of work and play, of community and industry, are profoundly collapsed.

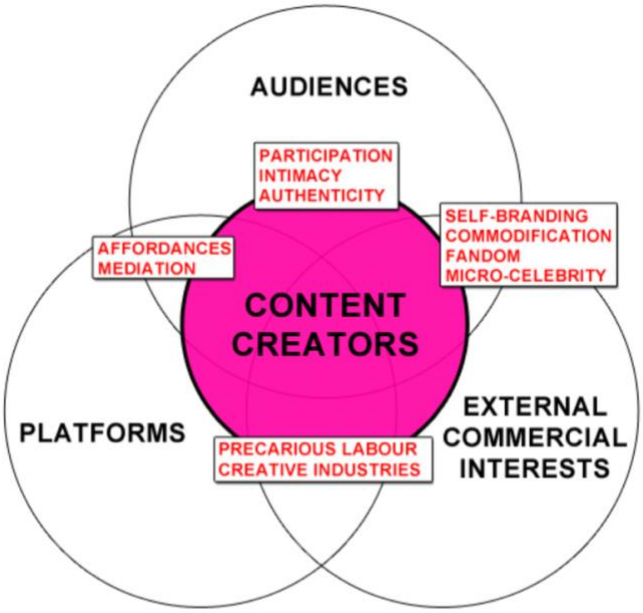

Figure 2: Venn diagram of research scope and speculative themes at the outset of the project

As an inductive methodology, ethnography begins with flexible research questions and problems that build in a dialectical process between data collection and data analysis towards the researcher formulating novel theoretical insights, deep descriptions, and explanations of the phenomena at hand (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007, p. 158). With this in mind, the project began with an intentionally wide and open-ended remit. *Fig. 2* above shows a Venn diagram that I made before beginning data collection to map out what I understood to be the field, which consisted of the myriad stakeholders that surround creators and impact their work: audiences, platforms (as both companies and technologies), brands, social media marketers, and other commercial parties, as well as some speculative themes. Further, several topics were identified as worthy of exploration, informed by my previous research on YouTube culture[7], which later shaped my semi-structured interview topic guide and how I approached fieldwork: creator-audience intimacy and authenticity; branded content and the increasing commercialisation of content creation; creators' understandings of and

[7] I wrote both my BA Social Anthropology (Glatt, 2013) and my MA Digital Media (Glatt, 2017) dissertations on different aspects of YouTube culture, which can be accessed here: https://zoeglatt.com/?page_id=26

negotiations with technological affordances like algorithms and metrics; the relationship between online and offline spaces; and the structures and cultural norms of the influencer industry as compared to legacy cultural industries. All of these themes can be found woven throughout the thesis, in addition to many more that emerged during data collection.

Over time, the project both expanded and narrowed in scope, observing the characteristic "funnel structure" of ethnographic research that becomes increasingly focused as a project goes on (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007, p. 160). The project grew far beyond the borders of YouTube to encompass the multi-platform environment that content creators work in. Indeed, the nature of cross-platform labour in the influencer industry became a major finding in the thesis. Nonetheless, the majority of my participants understood YouTube as their primary platform, with other platforms (variously Instagram, TikTok, Patreon, Twitch, Discord and Facebook) serving to bolster their reach and financial security. Further, the central themes of precarity and inequality crystalised throughout data collection and analysis.

1.4 The platformisation of the Cultural and Creative Industries

Hammersley and Atkinson observe that it is frequently well into ethnographic projects that "one discovers what the research is really about" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007, p. 160). It was two years into data collection that it became clear that this project was animated not only by a desire to understand content creators' lives in all their complexity and structural inequalities in the industry, but also a much broader question: *How is creative labour being reshaped by the platformisation of the Cultural and Creative Industries*?

The concept of "platformisation" was defined by Anne Helmond in 2015 as "the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data 'platform ready'" (p. 1). Since then, there has been a proliferation of research on the impacts of platformisation on creative industries and labour, to which this thesis contributes. As Duffy, Poell and Nieborg (2019) argue, platforms are "reconfiguring the production, distribution, and monetisation of cultural content in staggering and complex ways" (p. 1), and platformisation has extensive ramifications at both the institutional level and in the everyday cultural practices of producers and consumers, diverse in their cultural, geographic and sectoral-

industrial contexts. All cultural industries have had to adapt to the dominance of platformisation to a greater or lesser extent and every cultural industry has its specificities. Accordingly, the experiences of different types of cultural workers diverge in how they navigate the challenges and opportunities that platform environments present. But as Duffy, Poell and Nieborg (2019) put it, "such diversity does not belie their productive points of overlap which, together, reveal the potential for a systematic examination of the platform practices of the cultural industries" (p. 6). As an ethnographer, I am interested in the pursuit of knowledge from the ground up; it is through immersion in the granular detail of the influencer industry, in seeing creators interact and hearing them describe their experiences, that I seek a comprehensive understanding of this culture. However, in-depth knowledge of one industry can be generative for thinking about the wider context within which that industry sits. In this thesis, I draw out some of the patterned ways in which social media platforms as working environments provide both openings and foreclosures for specific kinds of participation, in contribution to cross-industry conversations around the nature and conditions of platformised cultural work more broadly.

Much like the importance of identifying similarities across different industries, likewise it is crucial to recognise the similarities between platformised creative labour and that which came prior. As Hesmondhalgh (2012/2019) argues, an obsession with the newness and novelty of digital innovations can lead to false claims that cultural production has been transformed "beyond recognition" (p. 6). I support his call for a more balanced assessment, one that is grounded in "a longer-term historical perspective than many of the celebrations of a new digital age", recognising noteworthy changes but also the significant continuities in cultural industries over time. As I will argue throughout this thesis, the work of influencers bears many of the hallmarks of creative labour that have been identified by researchers of the Cultural and Creative Industries going back three decades. And yet, their work is also shaped by novel formations, concerns, and challenges, which require critical scrutiny.

1.5 Structure of this thesis

Having briefly laid out its rationale, context, research questions and methodological design, here I will provide a summary of the remaining six chapters that make up this thesis.

Chapter 2, *Platformised creative labour: An intersectional feminist framework*, begins by situating the project theoretically and conceptually within the canon of cultural studies research on creative labour and Critical Media Industry Studies, which centre questions of power, identity, inequality and the agency of cultural workers within the larger structural imperatives of the media industries. With this groundwork laid, I explore the literature on creative labour across the pre-platformised Cultural and Creative Industries, paying close attention to research that addresses *precarity* and *inequality*, central themes that emerged during fieldwork. Next, I turn to more recent literature on the platformisation of cultural work and the labour of content creators within the influencer industry and make the case for the importance of an intersectional feminist framework in understanding platformised creative labour. Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies is introduced to provide a theory of identity categories as reciprocally constructing phenomena that shape complex social inequalities, inflected with an internet studies lens.

Chapter 3, *Embracing the "messy web" of intersectional feminist digital ethnography*, expands upon the methodological approach and design of the project. I retread the five-year ethnographic journey that I embarked on to reach this final thesis, beginning by situating the project as an intersectional feminist ethnography. Next, I outline the research design, describing the rationale, process, and challenges of carrying out the four strands of data collection that coalesced to form this project: online participant observation, offline participant observation, ethnographic semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography. I address the complexities of situating this project both geographically in London and within the global online USA-centric influencer industry; issues of participant selection, including questions of access, consent and ethics; and my ethnographic orientation to understanding technologies—platform, metrics, algorithms—*as*, rather than *in*, culture (Seaver, 2017). Then, I outline how the project emerged through the process of thematic analysis undertaken dialectically alongside data collection. In the final section, I address how I approached bringing the micro and the macro into view simultaneously through the fieldwork process.

The first empirical chapter, *"We're all told not to put our eggs in one basket": Precarity, hierarchy and structural inequalities in the influencer industry*[8], presents the core argument of this thesis, that platformisation has resulted in the intensification of the neoliberalisation of creative labour, with platformised creative workers tasked with "managing the self in conditions of radical uncertainty" in new and complex ways (Gill, 2010, p. 290). To make this claim, the chapter maps out some of the significant ways in which precarity and inequality are exacerbated for cultural workers in the influencer industry, with the analysis divided into three key findings: the necessity for content creators to diversify platforms and income streams; the struggles that smaller creators in particular face in this deeply hierarchical industry where metric-determined visibility is key to success; and the complex and compounding structural inequalities that marginalised creators face. I conclude by considering the "unimaginable futures" (Gill, 2010) for content creators and failures of meritocracy in the influencer industry.

Where Chapter 4 aims to map out the broader context of precarity and inequality in the influencer industry, Chapter 5, *Omnipotent God, black box, oppressor? "The Algorithm" in platformised creative work*[9], zooms in on algorithms as one of the central mechanisms that perpetuates such conditions for platformised creative workers. YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system—known colloquially as "The Algorithm"—is a powerful character in the lives of professional and aspiring social media content creators, exerting various pressures on them in their struggles for visibility and income. This chapter explores the multifaceted and situated ways that YouTube content creators understand and respond to "The Algorithm" in their working lives, through a close reading of their *discourses*, *practices* and *experiences*.

In the final empirical chapter, *The intimacy triple bind: Structural inequalities and relational labour in the influencer industry*[10], I turn my attention to the relationship between creators and their audiences. The careers of social media content creators live or die by their ability to cultivate and maintain an invested audience community. Whilst it is well established in the

[8] An earlier version of this chapter has been published in the *International Journal of Communication* (Glatt, 2022a).
[9] An earlier version of this chapter has been published in *The Routledge Companion to Media Anthropology* (Glatt, 2022b).
[10] A version of this chapter is forthcoming in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (Glatt, forthcoming).

literature that content creators are required to practice what has variously been framed as "emotional labour" (Hochschild, 1983/2002) and "relational labour" (Baym, 2018), I argue that there is a lack of attention paid to the unequal distribution of the tolls that managing these audience relationships can take. Situating the analysis within the context of the sociocultural, technological and commercial inequalities explored in Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter examines the ways in which structural inequalities shape creators' approaches to intimacy with their audiences and identifies key tactics that they employ to manage boundaries. Whilst relational labour and boundary-setting are fundamental aspects of labour for content creators more broadly, I argue the tolls of managing audience relationships are higher for marginalised creators, who find themselves in what I call the "intimacy triple bind".

In the final chapter, *Conclusions: Ways forward for the platformised creative worker*, I recapitulate the main findings and arguments presented throughout the thesis and make explicit its theoretical, conceptual, empirical, and methodological contributions to two bodies of literature: the platformisation of creative labour and industries, and research on the influencer industry and content creator labour. Drawing existing research on platformisation together with my empirical analysis, I present the *platformised creative worker* as the central conceptual contribution. Platformised creative workers, I argue, face heightened conditions of both precarity and inequality, marking an intensification of the neoliberal worker-subject as theorised in legacy cultural industries. To conclude, I consider ways forward for platformised creative workers, exploring how precarity and inequality in the influencer industry might be resisted through collective action, unionisation, and regulation. Further, I explore the ways in which platforms are co-opting the narratives of intersectionality and anti-racism, a move which I argue is more about reputational management than about presenting any meaningful challenge to structural relations of power. Finally, I provide a reflection on the thesis and consider directions for future scholarship.

CHAPTER 2

Platformised creative labour: An intersectional feminist framework

This chapter contextualises and positions this thesis within the relevant literatures on creative labour, platformisation of the Cultural and Creative Industries, and studies of influencer culture. I begin by situating the project theoretically and conceptually within the canon of cultural studies research on creative labour and Critical Media Industry Studies, which centre questions of power, identity, inequality and the agency of cultural workers within the larger structural imperatives of the media industries. Next, I explore the rich literature on creative labour across the pre-platformised Cultural and Creative Industries as a theoretical anchor with which to think laterally about the currently unfolding formation of platformised cultural work, paying close attention to research that addresses the central themes of this thesis: precarity and inequality. After building this theoretical foundation, I then turn to more recent literature on the platformisation of cultural work and the labour of content creators within the influencer industry, making the case for the importance of an intersectional feminist framework in understanding platformised creative labour. Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies is introduced to provide a theory of identity categories as reciprocally constructing phenomena that shape complex social inequalities, inflected with an internet studies lens.

2.1 A cultural studies approach: Critical Media Industry Studies and the question of political economy

While scholars from several disciplines and approaches have written about various aspects of the Cultural and Creative Industries—including but not limited to economics, business, management and organisational studies, sociology, and media and communications[11]—this project is situated within the rich canon of cultural studies research on creative labour. This

[11] See Hesmondhalgh's *The Cultural Industries* (2002/2019, pp. 48-80) for an excellent overview of the history of research on the Cultural and Creative Industries and cultural production dating back to the late 1970's.

scholarship highlights the relationship between cultural industries and broader patterns of culture, understanding that "an industry produces culture" but also that "culture produces an industry" (Negus, 1999, p. 14). Hesmondhalgh provides a helpful overview of cultural studies as a field, worth citing at some length here:

> Cultural studies is a diverse and fragmented field of study, but at its core is the attempt to examine and rethink culture by considering its relationship to social power. It began in the 1960s with the efforts of historians and literary scholars to understand the cultural experiences of marginalised and less powerful groups of people, such as the working class. It extended its terrain considerably in the 1970s and 1980s, deriving its political and intellectual energy from the great social movements that sought to gain rights and recognitions for women, people of colour, indigenous populations, LGBTQ groups, and colonial and non-Western populations. It drew on the ideas of writers and thinkers who often placed a strong emphasis on questions of identity, subjectivity and meaning, often in an effort to move beyond classical Marxist understandings of economy, society and culture, but maintaining a key interest in power. (2002/2019, pp 64-65)

Importantly, cultural studies scholars tend to centre questions of power and inequality, approaching these issues with a focus on the micro of everyday cultural practices and subjectivities—often through ethnographic research—rather than the more macro emphasis of critical political economists. In the 2000's, researchers "influenced explicitly and implicitly by cultural studies" (Hesmondhalgh, 2002/2019, p. 69) began to turn in greater numbers towards questions of cultural production and cultural industries. Hesmondhalgh helpfully identifies four major strands of research here: creative industries analysis, cultural work and cultural labour, production studies, and cultural studies of media industries (p. 68-72), all of which play important parts in this thesis.

It is worth taking a moment here to discuss a famously contentious debate in the critical analysis of media and culture, most ferociously contested in the 1980-90s: *cultural studies versus political economy*. Hardy observes that "it has been an unfortunate characteristic of radical 'left' movements to engage in often bitter and arcane sectarian divisions amongst

themselves" (2014, p. 20), and cultural studies versus political economy is no exception. Critical political economists of the media are also broadly concerned with questions of power, but take a more macro approach, asking such questions as: who has the power to make decisions about the direction of the media? Who benefits from these decisions? And how do these power relations operate? (for example, Meehan et al., 1993; Mosco, 2009; Wasko and Erikson, 2009). As Wasko summarises, critical political economists are primarily concerned with the allocation of resources within capitalist societies, and on the processes of "corporatization, commercialization, commodification and concentration" (2014, p. 260). Hesmondhalgh explains that the "crude opposition" between political economy and cultural studies "reflected the tensions between two different kinds of leftist politics, one based primarily on issues of social identity, such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality, the other on economics, internationalist politics and the redistribution of resources" (2002/2019, p. 74). Broadly speaking, critiques of cultural studies from political economists tend to centre around its inability to provide structural critiques of political and economic power dynamics. As Hardy puts it, "in some areas of enquiry, what began as an informed criticism of economism and reductiveness in analysis ended up as an evasion of problems of power in all but the most micro of contexts" (2014, p. 20). On the other hand, cultural studies scholars have critiqued political economic approaches for presenting totalising arguments about the larger level operations of media industries and society whilst neglecting questions of subjectivity, agency, and identity (McRobbie, 2016).

Hesmondhalgh claims that over time this division has faded and blurred, with many scholars recognising the importance of both social identity and the operations of geopolitical and financial power. For example, Saha argues in his research on the cultural production of race for an "equal emphasis on macro questions that deal with power, history and structure, and micro issues dealing with labour, agency and texts" (2018, p. 6). Whilst the inequitable distribution of resources within capitalism (who gets opportunities and resources and who does not) is fundamental to this thesis, as are critiques of the commercialization that undergirds the influencer industry, the way in which I approach these issues are primarily situated within a feminist cultural studies framework, emphasising the lived experiences, positionalities and subjectivities of my participants, with economic considerations being just one facet of a multitude of intersecting inequalities. This approach allows for a more nuanced

understanding of the ways in which neoliberal logics are permeating creative industries at the level of organisations and individuals.

Nonetheless, an approach that encompasses both the micro and the macro is vital for this thesis. The field of Critical Media Industry Studies provides such as approach, emphasising "a focus on agency within industry operations, a Gramscian theory of power that does not lead to complete domination, and a view of society and culture grounded in structuration and articulation" (Havens et al., 2009, p. 246). Importantly, Havens et al. refuse claims that any one person or entity is capable of exerting consistent and uncontested control over the means of cultural production. As they put it:

> The emphasis on ownership and market logics elides the complex workings within the media industries where cultural workers negotiate every facet of the production process in ways that cannot be easily predicted by or read off from the interests of those who control the allocative resources of the industries (2009, p. 248).

Rather than focussing solely on top-down or bottom-up operations of power, they propose the use of institutional case studies to examine the relationships between what de Certeau (1984) called *strategies* (macro-economic goals and logics of cultural industries) and *tactics* (the way in which cultural workers navigate, and perhaps circumvent or subvert, institutional or structural interests to their own ends). Power and resistance are understood to be mutually constitutive, and this framework allows us to analyse the ways in which "cultural workers maintain some degree of agency within the larger constraints imposed by the structural imperatives of the media industries, their owners, and regulators" (2009, p. 247). I have adopted this approach in this thesis to try to make sense of the relationality between content creators and the influencer industry in which they work.

2.2 Creative labour and the neoliberal worker-subject in the Cultural and Creative Industries

This thesis is fundamentally concerned with exploring the conditions of creative labour, which Banks and Hesmondhalgh define as work which is "geared to the production of original or distinctive commodities that are primarily aesthetic and/or symbolic-expressive, rather than

utilitarian and functional" (2009, p. 416). Shifting patterns of employment in the Cultural and Creative Industries away from stable structures, and the emergence of the *neoliberal worker-subject*: entrepreneurial, flexible, self-directed, always available to work, has been the topic of much academic scrutiny since the 1990's (e.g., Duffy, 2017; Gill, 2010; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh, 2002/2019; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; Neff, Wissinger and Zukin, 2005; Ross, 2003; McRobbie, 1998; 2002; 2016; Schlesinger, 2016). Studies of this type of labour highlight several common features, such as:

> A preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer; an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields. (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p. 20)

These scholars that produced this work situate their findings within the broader dominance of the neoliberal political and economic rationality that suffuses contemporary Western societies, characterised by the belief "that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Within this context, it is argued that individuals are interpellated into becoming "self-managing, autonomous and 'responsibilised'" subjects (Elias and Gill, 2018, p. 63). The Cultural and Creative Industries may be characterised by (the veneer of) bohemianism and informality, but "beyond the significations of play an intense self-discipline is required" (Gill, 2010, p. 308) and for this new ideal worker-subject, "every interaction is an opportunity for work" to the point where "life is a pitch" (p. 290). Further, as Gill argued in 2002, the mythologised glamour of this work as "cool, creative and egalitarian" serves to obscure and, worse, exacerbate entrenched forms of precarity and inequality endemic in the Cultural and Creative Industries (p. 70). Two decades after Gill's research, this contradiction between the romanticised ideal of passionate creative work and its lived realities marked by poor and

stressful labour conditions, emerged crystal clear through my own fieldwork with content creators, albeit with a different set of challenges unique to their platformised context. In the following sections, I explore in more detail the existing literature on precarity and inequalities in creative labour.

2.2.1 Precarity

Following Han (2018), I define precarity (in the context of work) broadly as "the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract labour and a loss of state provisioning" (p. 332). Precarity is a central feature of research on creative labour in the Cultural and Creative Industries. As Deuze found in his research on media workers, "this is a time when most people experience their lives as a perpetual white water, living in a state of constant flux and uncertainty" (2007, p. x). Within the broader context of transformations in advanced capitalism—variously understood as "post-Fordism, post-industrial society, network society, liquid modernity, information Society, new capitalism and Risk Society"—creative workers are forced to "[manage] the self in conditions of radical uncertainty" (Gill, 2010, p. 290).

Gill and Pratt outline how cultural workers negotiating short-term, insecure, poorly paid work in conditions of structural uncertainty have been described as emblematic of the new *precariat*, "a neologism that brings together the meanings of precariousness and proletariat to signify both an experience of exploitation and a (potential) new political subjectivity" (2008, p. 4). In the same vein, McRobbie (2016) argues that a "labour reform by stealth" has been happening in the UK cultural industries since the promotion of the creative economy during the times of the New Labour government starting in 1997, wherein "the new urban middle class is being de-socialized, and cut off from its earlier association with municipal socialism, public-mindedness and civic consciousness; instead it is persuaded to think and act only on its own behalf" (p. 60). In this brave new world, argues McRobbie, the language of "work and labour" is superseded by "business and entrepreneurship" (p. 60), echoing Schlesinger's claim that the discursive dominance of the "creative economy" has increasingly "obscured and crowded out conceptions of culture that are not in some way subordinate to economic considerations" (2016, p. 1). As Neff, Wissinger and Zukin put it succinctly, "the industry is 'hot,' and the jobs are 'cool'" (2005, p. 310). Drawn to the "youth, dynamism, and

informality" (Gill, 2002, p. 70) of the Cultural and Creative Industries and the promise of "work that doesn't seem like work" (Duffy, 2017, p. 226), aspiring creatives participate in self-exploitation in the form of long hours and poor pay (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin, 2005, p. 308). This is "self-invented work", unencumbered by so-called "interference" from the state, with waves of young people re-routed willingly into careers unprotected by welfare systems (McRobbie, 2016, p. 60).

Consequently, experiences of precarity in these fields are highly ambivalent. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) found that cultural workers "seem torn over the precariousness of their work", bemoaning the anxiety and stress caused, but in many cases seeing it as a necessary evil coupled with certain perks. One music journalist who they interviewed described his working conditions as involving freedom, but "a very complicated version of freedom" (p. 13), echoing Banks' (2007) claim that the allure of autonomy "is sufficiently powerful to override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this highly competitive and uncertain domain" (p. 55). Similarly, McRobbie (2002) identifies a "utopian thread embedded in this… attempt to make-over the world of work into something closer to a life of enthusiasm and enjoyment" (p. 521). However, she argues that this world of enjoyable work is couched within a neoliberal system, governed by the values of entrepreneurialism, individualism, and reliance on commercial sponsorship, where creative workers are left to shoulder the responsibility when things go wrong (Ibid.). Thus, a common theme across this literature is "the overwhelming quest for autonomy and individualism [that] displaces concerns about stability and security – as well as the hard realities of independent work" (Duffy, 2017, p. 226), wherein cultural workers' "aspirations to and expectations of autonomy could lead to disappointment and disillusion (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010, p. 5).

2.2.2 Inequalities

Over the past decade, scholars of the Cultural and Creative Industries have increasingly paid attention to the disjuncture between the framing of (new) media industries as cool, non-hierarchical and egalitarian and the structural inequalities experienced by those working in these industries (for example, Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015; Gill, 2002; 2014; Hesmondhalgh

and Saha, 2013; McRobbie, 2016; O'Brien et al., 2017; Saha, 2012; 2018; Thanki and Jeffreys, 2006). As is to be expected in industries where some win the job lottery but overall precarity is rife, "inequalities remain a depressingly persistent feature of most fields… marked by stark, persistent and in many cases worsening inequalities relating to gender, race and ethnicity, class, age and disability" (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015, p. 6). This assessment is supported by the industry-led body ScreenSkills, whose 2019 report stated that "overall the screen industries workforce is more male, more white, younger and better off, with fewer people with disabilities" (ScreenSkills, 2019, p. 7). Indeed, scholars have argued that in addition to all too familiar patterns of inequality relating to access to work and rates of pay, there are new forms of inequality emerging "relating to precisely the features of work that are most highly valued – autonomy, flexibility and informality" (Gill, 2014, p. 304; see also, Banks and Milestone, 2009; Gottschall and Kroos, 2007; Mayerhofer and Mokre, 2007; Perrons, 2003).

In London, which Conor, Gill and Taylor describe as "perhaps the creative city *par excellence*", women consistently fare worse than men according to indices of relative numbers in employment, pay, contractual status and seniority (2015, p. 6), due in part to the expectation of round-the-clock working, which is particularly egregious for those who have, or are considering having, children (Gill, 2010). Further, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals represent more than a quarter of London's workforce, but fewer than one in ten of the creative workforce (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015, p. 8). Such inequalities are exacerbated in times of economic upheaval. In the wake of the 2007-2009 recession, the resulting contraction of the TV industry in the UK saw women lose their jobs at a rate of six times that of men (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015, p. 7; see also Fawcett Society, 2009). More recently, ScreenSkills' 2021 report found that BAME workers were the worst hit financially by the COVID-19 pandemic "due to a lack of financial resilience to weather a long period of joblessness", causing concerns on their ability to enter and progress in the screen industries (ScreenSkills, 2021, p. 8).

As Hesmondhalgh and Saha summarise, scholars interested in unequal access to the means of cultural production have tended to focus on three dimensions: discriminatory hiring practices, media activism and advocacy, and diversity policies (2013, p. 185). According to the influential *circuit of culture* approach, policy (as a component of regulation) is a vital aspect

of cultural practice, alongside production, consumption, representation, and identity (Du Gay, et al., 1991). Policies in the Cultural and Creative Industries have often focussed on redressing imbalances in the composition of workforces, with recruitment targets set that aim to bring those groups most marginalised up to proportional parity with their number in society as a whole: women, racial and ethnic minorities, and those from working-class backgrounds (O'Brien et al., 2017, p. 275). This approach, which continues to have significant purchase in debates around diversity in the Cultural and Creative Industries, is based on the assumption that a more socially representative cultural workforce will produce better cultural representations, which will in turn benefit audiences (Ibid.). However, scholars have highlighted a number of problems with such policies. On an instrumental level, they are often ineffective at achieving their aims. Despite the prevalence of institutional equal opportunities policies, in their study of diversity amongst audio-visual workers in London, Holgate and McKay found that such policies were unsuccessful in this fragmented and insecure sector, where 50% of creatives were employed as freelancers and informal hiring practices were rife (2009, p. 151). According to their data, BAME workers faced additional structural barriers to entry based on racism and prejudice and had to work harder than their white counterparts to locate and construct the right networks that would lead to future work. In this context, they argue that equal opportunities policies are no more than rhetorical "empty shells" and that the informalisation of the labour force "mitigates any attempt to construct equality or diversity policies to address historical discrimination and disadvantage" (Holgate and McKay, 2009, p. 161).

Further, critical scholars, often hailing from cultural studies, argue that policies such as these that are based on what Gray (2016) calls a "demography and representation" approach are not sufficient to address inequalities and power imbalances in cultural representation and consumption. Put simply, "a more diverse workforce does not necessarily translate into more diverse representations" (O'Brien et al., 2017, p. 275; see also, Oakley and O'Brien, 2015). Sarita Malik (2013) analyses the paradigm shift in UK public service broadcasting policy discourses from "multiculturalism", through "cultural diversity", and finally to "creative diversity", a journey through which race has incrementally been depoliticized in public service broadcasting contexts. Here, she argues that ideas of quality and creativity are foregrounded over structural questions of inequality—with producers understood to be treated equally

within a presumed meritocracy—a move which serves to enable the marketization of television and multiculture, and ultimately to safeguard the interests of public service broadcasting. Malik's argument dovetails with Littler's critique of the concept of "meritocracy", which she argues has become a "potent blend" of an essentialised and exclusory notion of "talent", competitive individualism and the need for social mobility, to the point where "today it is a discourse which predominantly works to marketize the very idea of equality" (2013, p. 52).

Saha (2012) equally takes issue with diversity recruitment measures as an answer to inequalities, and frameworks that foreground meritocracy and the individual agency of cultural workers, in his ethnographic study of British Asians working in the UK broadcasting industry and the conditions of production through which minority representations are created. Building on work that highlights the fact that despite more minorities working in broadcasting than ever before, negative representations of race on screen continue to persist (Campion, 2005; Malik, 2008), he addresses how exoticized and pathologized representations come to be made as well as how British Asian filmmakers and executives themselves become complicit in this process. Saha argues that the continued production of problematic representations of racialised minorities, often produced by those very same minorities, are a result of a global shift towards neoliberalism, deregulation and marketization in the Cultural and Creative Industries. As he puts it:

> The case I have presented describes a different kind of institutional racism; one that is not just about restricted barriers to entry or glass ceilings, but the rationalized, standardized and commercially driven processes of contemporary television production that are inscribed with a broader neocolonial logic that coaxes black and Asian cultural producers into creating reductive representations of difference. (Saha, 2012, p. 436)

In my work with Sarah Banet-Weiser (2021), we employ a similar line of reasoning to the case of feminist social media content creators, who, we argue, are subject to powerful market forces that shape what can and cannot gain purchase within YouTube's economy of visibility. We found that those who fit into popular feminist "brand-safe" discourses and bodies, namely

depoliticized, white, heterosexual, cis-gendered and middle-class women, face significantly less adversity in their plight to build sustainable careers as feminist content creators. Conversely, those who represent more radical positions and marginal identities, especially those who inhabit multiple axis of marginalisation, face far greater barriers to earning a living and achieving visibility in the creator economy, an argument that I extend further in the following chapters.

What all of the works discussed in this section have in common is a critique of the earnest belief that meritocracy should be the guiding principle for better and more equitable Cultural and Creative Industries, and more broadly of depoliticized understandings of society that are based on notions of liberating individual entrepreneurial agency and creative freedoms. On the contrary, the scholars cited above believe instead that a robust critique of structural power relations—rooted in anti-racist, decolonial and social justice approaches, and critiques of processes of marketization, privatisation and neoliberalisation—is needed to meaningfully address inequalities in the Cultural and Creative Industries. I embrace this approach to cultural production in this thesis, applying it to the particular conditions that platformisation has wrought on cultural industries.

2.3 The platformisation of creative labour

In recent years, the majority of Cultural and Creative Industries have been transformed, to a greater or lesser extent, by platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, Goodreads, Amazon and Spotify, which now serve as intermediaries between producers, consumers and commercial stakeholders. This transformation has occurred within the broader context of platformisation across many sectors of the economy, a process that has been influentially described in terms of the emergence of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017), with the foundations of the economy being carved up among a small number of monopolistic tech companies, marking a major shift in how capitalist firms operate. While this approach has provided important insights into top-level changes in the economy, Srnicek's totalising approach, which addresses tech companies purely as "economic actors within a capitalist mode of production" (p. 3), is insufficient for understanding this process in terms of cultural

and political dynamics, completely devoid of any consideration of agency, ideology, subjectivity or practices.

Whilst there has been a proliferation of interest on the impacts of platformisation on labour practices more broadly—most notably relating to the gig economy and crowdwork[12]—the Cultural and Creative Industries have distinct histories and social formations that require their own analysis in the context of platformisation, as Duffy, Poell and Nieborg have argued convincingly (2019; 2021). Unlike the gig economy, labour in the Cultural and Creative Industries has long been marked by a "passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer" (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 20), with cultural workers willing to endure precarious working conditions as a result, as discussed in the previous sections. Nieborg and Poell define the platformisation of cultural industries as "the penetration of economic and infrastructural extensions of online platforms into the web, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content", impelling cultural producers to "develop publishing strategies that are aligned with the business models of platforms" (2018, p. 8). Broadening their inquiry beyond political-economic dimensions, in the introduction to the first of their comprehensive two-part special issue on the "Platformization of Cultural Production" in *Social Media + Society*, editors Duffy, Poell and Nieborg (2019) contend that a systematic examination of the platformisation of cultural production is as much about cultural practices of labour, creativity and citizenship as it is about institutional changes to markets, governance and infrastructures. Thus, they theme the 14 articles into four thematic clusters: contintuity and change; diversity and creativity; labour in an age of algorithmic systems; and power, autonomy, and citizenship. As they note in their follow-up book *Platforms and Cultural Production*, perhaps the most significant departure in the cultural industries between legacy media companies and platforms is their differing strategies with regards to openness and gatekeeping (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2021, p. 6), characterised by Shirky as "filter-then-publish" versus "publish-then-filter" (2008, p. 98). In legacy media the barriers to entry are

[12] Research into platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo and Amazon Mechanical Turk has provided vital insights (Chen, 2019; Gray and Suri, 2019; Rosenblat, 2018). For example, in their ethnographic research into labour in the vast, invisible "ghost economy" that undergirds platforms such as Amazon, Google and Microsoft, Gray and Suri argue that for low-income earners with extremely limited bargaining power, the "algorithmic cruelty" of work dependent on the "thoughtless processes" of AI has severe economic and social consequences, in contexts where platforms have little to no accountability to workers (2019, p. 68)

high, with cultural workers having to jump through many institutional hoops to attain paid work. Platforms, on the other hand, facilitate "the ability of users to quickly and easily join…and begin participating in the value creation that the platform facilitates" (Parker et al., 2017, p. 25). It is only after the point that cultural producers publish content that platforms begin their gatekeeping, via algorithmic sorting of what is made visible to audiences and, as is the case on YouTube, what can be monetised via pairing with advertisers. This difference goes some way to explaining the widespread perception that the influencer industry is more open and egalitarian than legacy cultural industries.

Research has been conducted into the platformisation of a range of cultural industries, including journalism (Christin, 2020b; Petre, 2021), music (Baym, 2018; Bonini and Gandini, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, Jones and Rauh, 2019), gaming (Gray, 2020; Johnson and Woodcock, 2019; Taylor, 2018) and publishing (Tomasena, 2019) and, of course, the influencer industry (Abidin, 2018; Bishop, 2018a; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Hund, 2023). Platformised creative labour across the Cultural and Creative Industries is characterised by noteworthy commonalities, shaped by the particular configurations of power, capital and sociality on and of social media platforms. Several scholars have written about the extreme levels of datafication in platformised contexts, whereby analytics and metrics have become increasingly central to success for cultural producers (Baym et al., 2021; Christin, 2020b; Christin et al., 2021; Marwick, 2013; Petre, 2021). Some have provided top-down critiques of datafication, such as van Dijck who argues that social media platforms are structured by the "popularity principle… an ideology that values hierarchy, competition, and a winner-takes-all mindset (2013, p. 21), and Eubanks who addresses the ways in which data are used and abused to discipline the most disenfranchised across sectors as varied as finance, employment, politics, health and human services (2018). Rather than adopt totalising critiques of datafication, in their study of metrics in the music industries Baym et al. argue for a sociological approach that considers the diverse ways that cultural producers interact with, make sense of, and deploy data in their everyday working lives, taking up Nafus' call to "domesticate data—what people make of what the machines are telling them, and what resources are available to do this" (2016, p. 394). They found that producers engage in their own sensemaking practices, with metrics utilised as the basis for a range of activities including "making predictions, telling stories, conveying trajectories, and exercising persuasion" (Baym

et al., p. 3437), and that some actors were much more captivated and motivated by numbers than others, a finding which was reflected amongst my participants.

Closely related to work on datafication and metrics has been the growing interest in the sociocultural dimensions of algorithms, which are an important aspect of the digital media landscape providing the foundational architecture for how social media platforms are structured. Rather than view algorithms simply as technological black boxes to be opened, critical qualitative approaches understand them as "complex sociotechnical assemblages involving long chains of actors, technologies, and meanings" (Christin, 2020a, p. 898), as "heterogeneous and diffuse sociotechnical systems… [that are] part of broad patterns of meaning and practice" (Seaver, 2017, p. 1), and as "material-discursive" systems that generate particular formations of power and politics in social life (Bucher, 2018). In platformised cultural industries, scholars have recognised the primacy of algorithmic recommendation and the need for cultural producers "to be visible for platform-specific contexts" (Bishop, 2019a, p. 4; see also, Duffy and Hund, 2019; Duffy and Meisner, 2022; Glatt, 2022a; 2022b; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Petre, Duffy and Hund, 2019). Algorithmic recommendation systems sort and offer content to viewers according to a calculation of the likelihood that they will watch it based on a variety of metrics. Further, they determine which content should be (de)monetised in the context of platforms like YouTube that split advertising revenue with eligible creators. In Chapter 5, I build on these works through an exploration of the multifaceted and situated ways that YouTube content creators understand and respond to "The Algorithm" in their working lives, through a close reading of their *discourses*, *practices* and *experiences*.

Several further dynamics have been identified by scholars of platformisation and cultural work, including the expectation of "access, immediacy, and instantaneity", with creative workers pressured towards "continuous and multiple uploads of performances of a private self" (Jerslev, 2016, p. 5238); complex, fragmented working environments involving multiple platforms (Scolere et al., 2018), each with distinct sociotechnological arrangements and challenges; increasingly individualistic and risky labour conditions in unstable platform environments (Duffy, Poell and Nieborg, 2019, p. 4), paired with fewer legal protections and further challenges to collective action (Niebler and Kern, 2020); a situation wherein cultural

producers become dependent on platforms (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2021), which are structured by inequitable systems of "tiered governance" (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020), whilst simultaneously unable to communicate grievances directly with these platforms (Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021; Glatt, 2022b); and a necessity for cultural workers to align their self-brands with those of platforms, shaped most significantly by the interests and values of advertisers, leading to an "intensification of commercialism" (Hesmondhalgh, 2002/2019, p. 274) and an escalation of structural inequalities (Brock, 2011; 2020; Christian, 2016; Glatt, 2022a; Noble, 2018; Noble and Tynes, 2016). Through the empirical analysis, I explore how these diverse factors coalesce to shape the lived experiences of content creators working in the influencer industry.

2.4 An intersectional feminist approach to creator labour and the influencer industry

A lot of attention has been paid to the beauty, fashion and lifestyle genres in academic research on social media influencers to date (for example, Abidin 2016; Bishop 2018, 2019a; Duffy 2017; Duffy and Hund 2015, 2019; García-Rapp 2017; Jerslev 2016), in part because they are one of the most visible groups, and also because their labour is so explicitly tied up with brands and products that they offer an interesting case study for the processes of commercialisation, formalisation and professionalisation. This thesis builds on a sub-section of this literature, namely critical feminist research on influencers that foregrounds issues of identity and representation and centralises questions of power, inequality and visibility (for example, Bishop, 2018a; 2019a; 2019b; Duffy, 2017; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Duguay, 2019; O'Meara, 2019).

Particularly foundational for this thesis is Brooke Erin Duffy's seminal book *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work* (2017). The core argument of the book is that contrary to journalistic representations that highlight the exceptional few who have achieved extraordinary success, the vast majority of individuals carry out endless "aspirational labour" on social media platforms, approaching their unpaid work online as investments in a future self that will hopefully be able to "do what they love" for a living (p. x), problematising the Silicon Valley-esque narrative that with hard work and gumption anyone can "make it" in this industry where "pleasure, passion, and profit meld" (p. 227). The

book draws two particularly poignant conclusions. Firstly, Duffy highlights the "inherently rigged" nature of brand-blogger relations in this industry. Aspiring social media producers are urged to promote corporate brands' products and messages not for money, but for "potential exposure", in the hopes that someday they will become paid brand ambassadors (p. 221). And secondly, she contends that despite meritocratic and idealistic rhetoric, traditional inequalities across the intersections of race, class and gender persist, and indeed the barriers to entry remain "staggeringly high" in social media work. As is the case in tech and other cultural industries, the social media producers most likely to rise to the top hail from the privilege: they tend to be white, educated, and possess family connections and financial support (p. 223).

It is Duffy's attendance to and respect for her interviewees, rooted in feminist research methods, that is the greatest strength of the book. Rather than present a sweeping and damning critique of the industry or those that work within it, as is sometimes the case particularly with works arising from critical political economy perspectives, she instead paints a more nuanced picture that reflects creators' complex subjective experiences and feelings of ambivalence. She does not treat them as "cultural dupes", instead choosing to foreground the tensions "between labor and leisure, between the internal self and external publics, between authenticity and self-promotion, and between creativity and commerce" (p. 219). In the pursuit of earning a living, she argues that social media producers traverse a tightrope: they need to appear credible and professional in order to court brand collaborations and thus to earn a living, whilst at the same time defending against audience accusations of having "sold out", a theme that rang true during my fieldwork and which I address in Chapter 5. Duffy's embracing of contradiction provides a refreshing and compelling depiction of the messy everyday lives of those carrying out this aspirational labour. This thesis also builds on and dialogues with Sophie Bishop's body of feminist political economy research on the influencer industry, which emphasises how myriad stakeholders coalesce to shape gendered dynamics, including platforms, advertisers, social media marketers and other commercial intermediaries. Bishop's work has been particularly influential in pushing forward understandings of how algorithmic systems create a discriminatory visibility hierarchy of content creators (Bishop, 2018a; 2018b; 2020; 2021).

As the above cases exemplify, critical feminist work to date has tended to focus more on the gendered and feminised genres and dimensions of influencer labour. Duffy's book (2017), for example, whilst providing vital insights about aspirational labour, drew on 55 interviews with predominantly white, young women working in the lifestyle, beauty and fashion genres, with an emphasis on Instagram and personal blogs. Likewise, Bishop's work has focussed predominantly on white, middle-class women, this time hailing from the beauty vlogging genre on YouTube. While both scholars make vital contributions to questions of power, inequality and capital in the influencer industry, it is primarily through a critical analysis of what and who is *missing* from their cases, most notably racial, gender and class diversity, and content genres less commensurate within a neoliberal economy of visibility.

A serious engagement with race especially is notably absent or lacking in much of the existing critical literature on influencer industries. This strikes me as problematic, not least because the lack racial diversity is a well-established problem in the Cultural and Creative Industries more broadly. A number of my research participants and those speaking at industry events reflected on the systemic racism in the influencer industry, which I explore further throughout my analysis. There has been an interest in the ways in which race is expressed, experienced and mediated online since the inception of internet studies (for example, Brock 2009; 2011; 2020; Christian, 2016; Daniels, 2012; Day and Christian, 2017; Gray, 2016; 2020; Gray and Leonard, 2018; Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman, 2000; Mukherjee, Banet-Weiser and Gray, 2019; Nakamura, 2002; 2008; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012; Noble, 2018; Noble and Tynes, 2016; Sobande, 2017). And yet, as Jessie Daniels (2012) argues in her comprehensive literature review of race and racism in the field of internet studies, Whiteness as a social construct continues to serve as the default and invisible lens for the majority of scholarly work, and that:

> The burden of noticing race on the Internet has been left to Internet researchers who are people of color, reinforcing what Stuart Hall refers to as the 'spectacle of the Other.' This is not in any way to disparage that research or those researchers, but rather to shed light on the preponderance of research about the Internet done by white people that rarely acknowledges the salience of race but instead clings to a fantasy of a color-blind web. (p. 712)

The dominance of colour blindness and broader narratives of post-raciality serve to obscure enduring and emerging forms of discrimination and make it "more difficult to intervene on how power operates on the Internet surface" (Noble and Tynes, 2016, p. 4). I do not mean to imply that feminist influencer scholars cling to fantasies of a colour-blind web, but simply that race as a vector of identity has been insufficiently explored in the feminist research on content creator labour and influencer industries to date.

This thesis adopts an explicitly intersectional framework to address power and inequality in the influencer industry. Whilst critical media industry studies provides a useful framework for the study of cultural workers within industry settings, it does not provide the conceptual and theoretical tools to address structural inequalities across identity categories. Here I draw on the burgeoning field of Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies (Noble and Tynes, 2016). It is important here to clarify what I understand "intersectionality" to mean. Though the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw as late as 1989, a fundamental interest in the inseparability of identity categories when talking about the formations of power and oppression has much older roots. As Noble and Tynes highlight, the conceptualisation of power and oppression "across multiple axes" (2016, p. 2) has been traced back to the speeches of Maria Stewart (1831) and Sojourner Truth (1851), and since then various terminology and conceptualisations have emerged, including "'double jeopardy' (Beale, 1970), 'simultaneity' (Combahee River Collective, 1986), 'interlocking oppressions' (Hull et al., 1982), 'race-gender-class' (Collins, 1991; 2000), and 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991)" (Noble and Tynes, 2016, p. 2). In line with Noble and Tynes, I too draw upon Patricia Hill Collins' definition of intersectionality to encompass "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (2015, p. 32). I also draw here on the work Angela Davis (1981), for her explicit disavowal of capitalism and the ways in which it systematically disadvantages marginalised groups in complex intersecting ways.

Seeking to formalise intersectional approaches to technology as a field of study, Noble and Tynes establish the mission of Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies in their edited

volume *The intersectional Internet: Race, sex, class, and culture online* as "theorization in a field of Internet studies that engages with social constructions of Whiteness and the material power and accumulation of wealth, resources, and privileges based on historical and contemporary discrimination against the 'other'" (2016, p. 4). Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies is especially powerful as a framework for critique is its emphasis not only on how power operates to marginalise and oppress particular groups in internet *cultures* (i.e. through racism, homophobia or misogyny in online spaces), but also how these power structures are baked in to the very *design* of the websites and platforms that make up the Western internet, in ways that reflect the (predominantly white, straight, male and cisgender) biases and interests of those who create, own and have sway over them. In other words, Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies offers us a framework for thinking about how technologies and internet culture are inherently discriminatory and centres the marginalisation of certain identities online, mirroring offline contexts. Particularly inspirational was Kishonna Gray's was substantial body of work, which presents powerful critiques of the persistence of racism, sexism, heterosexism and ableism embedded in digital technologies through her deeply qualitative explorations of gaming cultures (examples include Gray, 2016; 2020; see also Chan and Gray, 2020; Gray and Leonard, 2018).

My findings during fieldwork and interviews with a diverse range of content creators across intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality and ability, as well as a wide array of content genres and levels of professionalism, strongly support the broader mission of Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies. There are significant and complex ways that identity categories factor into the opportunities and experiences of content creators in the influencer industry, which have been insufficiently explored in previous literature. I therefore find it essential to bring the existing body of feminist research on influencer industries into dialogue with the burgeoning field of Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies. In this thesis I seek to understand the "social relations that are embedded in our digital technologies" in order to "foster a clearer understanding of how power relations are organised through technologies" (Noble and Tynes, 2016, p. 1) in the influencer industry: between different creators, between creators and the platforms they work on/for, between creators and their audiences, and between creators and broader industry actors. The explicitly platformised

nature of the influencer industry has significant implications for the ways in which power circulates and operates, for who is excluded and how, which I explore through my analysis.

It is important to note that during the latter stages of writing this thesis more intersectional literature began to emerge from influencer studies scholars, to consider the ways in which creators from a range of historically marginalised groups are disproportionally punished and face higher risks in the influencer industry. Duffy and Meisner's 2022 article about inequitable arrangements of platform governance drew on interviews with content creators from historically marginalised identities, and crucially also from stigmatized content genres, to explore their experiences of algorithmic (in)visibility. They invoke Foucault's (1977) work on governmentality to argue that platform architectures promote content that is palatable for mass consumption—namely from normative subjectivities and depoliticised genres—corroborating mine and Banet-Weiser's findings regarding the economy of visibility of feminist content (Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021). This thesis also dialogues with Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt recent 2022 article that strives to understand the relationship between the requisite career visibility and the resultant public scrutiny, hate and harassment that is par for the course for influencers, "all of which are exacerbated for women, communities of color, and the LGBTQIA community" (2022, p. 1661), a theme which is explored in Chapter 6.

Having laid out the theoretical frameworks that inform this project, it is worth clarifying that my goal in this thesis is to provide a nuanced and empirically grounded analysis of the platformisation of creative labour, examining the sociocultural, technological, and commercial factors that shape content creator labour. It is within this context that I explore which creators are able to gain visibility and success, and conversely who is systematically excluded from opportunities. What this means in practise is that in the empirical analysis that follows, some sections that are concerned with the conditions of precarity that characterise content creator labour in the influencer industry more generally, while other sections deal more concretely with the ways in which these conditions produce and solidify structural inequalities across intersections of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class and gender. In the next chapter, I detail the methodological approach and research design of the project.

CHAPTER 3

Embracing the “messy web” of intersectional feminist digital ethnography

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In this chapter I retread the five-year ethnographic journey that I embarked on to reach this final thesis. I begin by situating the project methodologically within the traditions of feminist and intersectional ethnography and discuss some of the challenges I faced. Next, I outline the research design and explore the rationale and process of carrying out the four strands of data collection that coalesced to form this project: online participant observation, offline participant observation, ethnographic semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography. I address the complexities of situating this project both geographically in London and within the global USA-centric influencer industry; issues of participant selection, including questions of access, consent and ethics; and my ethnographic orientation to understanding technologies—platform, metrics, algorithms—*as*, rather than *in*, culture (Seaver, 2017). Then, I outline how the project emerged through the process of thematic analysis undertaken dialectically alongside data collection, before finally addressing how I approached bringing the micro and the macro into view simultaneously through the fieldwork process.

3.1 Building an intersectional feminist ethnography: Power, inequality and self-reflexivity in the research process

This project is deeply informed by feminist and intersectional approaches to ethnography and to qualitative research methods more broadly, which are used to “show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). There were a number of methodological questions and challenges that I had to work through to make sure that I was conducting fieldwork and interviews in ways that aligned with the project’s intersectional feminist ethics and epistemology, which I explore throughout this chapter.

Intersectional feminist ethnography is a framework that recognises the inseparability of identity categories when talking about the formations of power and oppression, but it is important to highlight that it does not simply denote an interest in the dynamics of race, gender, class, and so on, in society. It also encompasses an epistemological orientation towards the construction of knowledge itself, a critical sensibility towards questions of power and inequality, and an ethical orientation towards the relationship between researcher and participant. As Judith Stacey puts it in her seminal essay 'Can there be a feminist ethnography?':

> Feminist scholars evince widespread disenchantment with the dualisms, abstractions, and detachment of positivism, rejecting the separations between subject and object, thought and feeling, knower and known, and political and personal… Discussions of feminist methodology generally assault the hierarchical, exploitative relations of conventional research, urging feminist researchers to seek instead an egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her "subjects". (1988, p. 21-22).

In this quote, "feminist scholars" could be replaced with "ethnographers" and still make perfect sense. But whilst there is a longstanding recognition of the comfortable coalition between feminist scholarship and ethnographic methods in terms of ethics and sensibility, historically ethnography has had an uneasy relationship with approaches that impose *a priori* theoretical and political frameworks for understanding culture, the most fundamental tenet of ethnographic knowledge production being that it should always be built empirically from the ground up. Equally, some might ask, if we want to enact positive change as researchers of digital technologies, would it not be preferable to adopt theoretical and methodological approaches that present powerful and unambivalent "cultural and historical critiques" (Christin, 2020a, p. 900) of macro-structural asymmetries of power, such as racial inequality (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018) or marketisation (van Dijck, 2013), finding the multiplicity and situatedness of ethnography to be an impediment to the mission of social justice and tackling inequalities.

While it could be argued that inviting complexity and ambiguity weakens the critical potential of scholarship, I posit that it is in first studying how power operates in everyday life—in attending to the "micrological processes by which power… is unfolded and played out, how it is set loose, impacting on everyday activity" (McRobbie, 2016, p. 61)—that social researchers can form the most nuanced and ultimately useful critical perspectives. As Seaver puts it, "ethnographic methods are well suited to the concerns that tend to occupy critical scholars… Ethnography roots these concerns in empirical soil, resisting arguments that threaten to wash away ordinary experience in a flood of abstraction" (2017, p. 2). In support of this perspective, writing about the potential tensions between feminism's dual agendas as a political and analytical project (Avishai et al., 2012), O'Neill challenges the idea that politics must cede to analysis when conflicts do arise. As she argues:

> Doing justice to our political commitments means doing justice to our research participants and speaking truth to the realities of their lives. Feminist scholars cannot abdicate our responsibility to critique but, rather, must strive to ensure that the always composite portraits we produce are nevertheless as complete and accurate as possible. After all, if we want to challenge the wider economies of power in which we all operate, it is necessary to know as much as possible, in as much detail as possible, about the foundations on which they are built. (2018, p. 188)

Despite my best efforts to represent my participants with nuance—and to understand their lived experiences as shaped by the complex entanglements of identities—at different points throughout the analysis I choose to foreground singular vectors of identity, such as race, sexuality or gender, allowing me to critically analyse mechanisms of exclusion in the influencer industry with more depth. As Kishonna Gray found in her intersectional ethnography of Black users in digital gaming:

> I had to accept the flattening of multidimensional people, communities, and experiences to fit the traditional format of an academic text… I sometimes had to go against my training as an intersectional feminist and present singular analyses around

> race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class, as opposed to keeping them troubled, tangled, and whole (2020, p. 8)

Self-reflexivity is a cornerstone of the ethnographic methodology. The majority of the data being analysed are the researcher's own fieldnotes, which are interpretations of phenomena borne out of their own interactions and understandings of the field, to which the researcher's personal biography and relationship to the field are foundational. While the ethnographic methodology rejects the idea that "social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007, p. 16), striving to account for the ways in which my own biography and biases impact my finding and interpretations was essential. As Gajjala puts it, an ethnographer must constantly ask themself "what [are] my hidden presumptions/assumptions and biases?" (2002, p. 184).

As discussed in the previous chapter, I concur with Daniels' (2012) challenge to the burden for noticing race in internet studies being left to researchers of colour. Beyond racism, the same can be said for other vectors of marginalisation such as heteronormativity, classism, ableism, misogyny and colonialism, issues often neglected by scholars who are not subjugated by these dynamics. The assumption that tackling these issues should be left to those who inhabit positions of marginality is deeply problematic, and as such, intersecting forms of structural inequalities in the influencer industry are central to this project. However, being a white, middle-class, cisgender, able-bodied, London-based woman in my late 20s (through the PhD becoming a mother in her early 30s) bestowed upon me considerable privilege, especially in allowing me to move through industry spaces with relative ease. Thus, conducting this research, which addresses the experiences of creators from historically marginalised groups, required the utmost care and self-reflexivity, a central concern in ethnographic research being the representation of Others: "speaking for," "speaking to," "speaking with," and "speaking about" human subjects of research (Gajjala, 2002, p. 184). The autoethnographic portion of the research, detailed in section 3.3.4, required particular consideration. As someone asked me when I presented on this aspect of the project at the *Global Perspectives on Platforms and Cultural Production* conference at the University of Amsterdam in 2022, "how are *you* able to say anything about inequality and marginalisation

through your autoethnographic research?". This is indeed a vital question, to which my response was that autoethnography was able to provide me with certain types of insights, especially into the precarity of content creation and the anxious metrification of self-worth, but little about inequality, inhabiting a positionality of privilege that I do. When talking about experiences of inequality and marginalisation in the thesis, I choose to quote participants directly, either with interview data or fieldnotes, letting them speak for themselves in order to minimise the risk of misinterpretation or exploitation.

While my identity in many ways made my experience of in-person fieldwork easier, in other ways it made it more challenging for me to see certain power dynamics unfolding. A pivotal moment in my understanding of systemic issues of racism in the London community-industry was the result of a conversation with participant Taha Khan about an event that I had attended, long after the fact. Taha was the Panels Coordinator for Summer in the City (SitC) 2018, the UK's biggest community-oriented online video event, from 2016-2019, an important role that gave him the power to select invited speakers. SitC 2018 was one of the first major fieldwork events that I attended for this research, from which I gleaned many insights about the nature of content creator labour and operations of the influencer industry. However, I completely missed the ongoing issues of and conversations about racial exclusions at the event, with many creators of colour feeling side-lined both by the event organisers and by other creators, a dynamic that I discuss in more detail in in the next chapter. This conversation with Taha was uncomfortable. After explaining what had happened, he said to me "I bet you didn't even realise this was happening although you were doing research at the event". He was right, I hadn't noticed these dynamics unfolding, busy talking to other creators and completely oblivious to what had unfolded. Our conversation swirled around my head for many weeks, causing me to doubt the project and myself as an ethnographer. How could I have missed something so vital? What else had I missed? This series of events was a powerful reminder of the situatedness of ethnographic knowledge: which conversation I was and was not privy to and what I would pick up in the field, be that online or offline, was radically dependent on my own positionality and preoccupations. It was also a lesson in how to be malleable and open as an ethnographer, to follow leads as they arose and not get too stuck on one idea of where the project might end up. I owe Taha a huge debt of gratitude for helping

me to understand these racial dynamics in the London creator community-industry, which ended up being a crucial component of the analysis.

In closing this section, I clarify that as an intersectional feminist work, this thesis cannot and does not pretend to adopt a neutral stance. As Lazar explains, feminist scholarship "makes its biases part of its argument… [raising] as problematic the notion of scientific neutrality itself, as failing to recognize that all knowledge is socially and historically constructed and valuationally based" (2007, p. 146). Here, the postulate of value free research and neutrality is replaced by a conscious partiality towards the oppressed and an engagement in their struggles for change (Mies, 1983). In line with the approaches outlined above, it is in framing the micro ethnographic insights gleaned during the course of this research within macro structures of power that I see this project as making the most meaningful contribution to knowledge and change.

3.2 Starting out with everything but the kitchen sink: Embracing the "messy web" of digital ethnography

> This backward order of things – first you write and then you figure out what you are writing about – may seem odd, or even perverse, but it is, I think, at least most of the time, standard procedure in cultural anthropology. Some pretenders to high science and higher technique aside, we do not start out with well-formed ideas we carry off to distant places to check out by means of carefully codified procedures systematically applied. We go off to these places, or, increasingly these days, ones closer by, with some general notions of what we would like to look into and of how we might go about looking into them. We then in fact look into them (or, often enough, look instead into others that turn out to be more interesting), and after doing so we return to sort through our notes and memories, both of them defective, to see what we might have uncovered that clarifies anything or leads on to useful revisions of received ideas, our own or someone else's about something or other. The writing this produces is accordingly exploratory, self-questioning, and shaped more by the occasions of its production than its post-hoc organization into chaptered books and thematic monographs might suggest. (Geertz 1973/2000, p. vi)

As this quote from Geertz so wonderfully evokes, the process of collecting data and writing this thesis was full of highs and lows: at times frustrating, directionless, and wrought with uncertainty that I would ever find something worth saying, but also characterised by moments of inspiration and excitement when ideas clicked, and findings slotted into place. Upon beginning to plan the project, before I could even start fieldwork, I promptly encountered my first hurdle, as many ethnographers of digital cultures had before me: where, exactly, should I *go* in my quest to research this industry that has grown out of the internet and the people who work within it, and how could I gain an understanding of this culture when I got there? Postill and Pink refer to digital ethnography as a "messy web", describing social media as a research environment that is "constantly in progress and changing, and implicates physical as well as digital localities" (2012, p. 125). In this section I outline the research design, describing the rationale, process, and challenges of carrying out the four strands of data collection that coalesced to form this project: online participant observation, offline participant observation, ethnographic semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography.

Many digital ethnographers have written about their methodological struggles. Researchers of internet cultures have asked questions such as: is it better to try to follow certain individuals as they move fluidly between online and offline spaces, which boyd explains she tried and failed to achieve seamlessly in her study of teens on MySpace (2016)? Or else to stay in a particular offline or online location and observe those who move through the space, as Burrell (2009) and Boellstorff (2008) opted for respectively in their ethnographies of internet cafes in Ghana and the virtual world of Second Life? How does one delimit the boundaries of the field when it is not confined to one geography (Hine, 2000; 2015; 2017; boyd, 2009)? Does it make sense to study a single platform/website or is it necessary to trace their networks and movements across multiple online spaces, as Baym found in her study of a Swedish independent music fandom (2007)? How can researchers account for the differences in interpreting online and offline data (Baym, 2000; boyd, 2016; Hine, 2015; Orgad, 2009), and bring them together, harmoniously or otherwise (boyd, 2016; Leander and McKim, 2003; Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2002; Wilson, 2006)? All these questions are challenging to answer in the context of social media content creators who are geographically

dispersed and highly active across many different platforms, embedded within an industry context, and incredibly varied in terms of experiences, backgrounds and degrees of professionalism.

How to account for the relationship between online and offline settings is one of the longest-standing debates amongst ethnographers of digital cultures, and this was where I began with research design. Some famous early ethnographies of virtual worlds and internet culture were conducted solely online. In *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), anthropologist Tom Boellstorff created an avatar and "lived" in a rich virtual world—where residents buy and sell property and goods, attend weddings and religious services, and develop meaningful relationships—for two years to explore issues of gender, race, sex, money, and time. In *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (2000), Nancy Baym conducted three years of online ethnographic research[13] with the participants of a Usenet group dedicated to discussing soap operas, to explore issues of online community and fandom. At the other end of the spectrum, Miller and Slater (2000) and later Horst and Miller (2012) developed a geographical place-based approach to internet ethnography, more in line with traditional anthropological studies, privileging co-located participants and local cultural uses of digital technologies over geographically disparate online cultures and communities.

Of course, it depends on one's research questions and the culture being studied, with each approach having its place in scholarship, but I concluded that neither extreme was appropriate for my study of content creators working in the influencer industry. Whilst purely online ethnography arguably made more sense in the early days of the internet when it was possible to focus on one bounded setting, such as a virtual world or niche discussion forum, I concur with Hine's assessment that in its current incarnation where social media has become dominant in the West, the internet is intimately and ubiquitously woven into the fabric of everyday (offline) life and therefore needs to be studied within this context (2017, p. 317). Understanding the online cultural activities of content creators—both the content they share and their social interactions with their audiences—is vital for this research, but it only tells part of the story. These are aspects of the performance of being a content creator, the *front*

[13] Baym supplemented her ethnographic findings with qualitative survey responses from community members.

stage as Goffman (1956) would put it. However, there are many facets of this industry and the work and lives of creators that are not readily understandable from this context alone. Equally, whilst geographically co-located content creators have a shared cultural context that needs to be understood in relation to their social media work, they are also working on global platforms that have their own distinct cultural and content norms that cross geographical boundaries, competing for attention and opportunities in a context where the most successful and influential creators are based in the USA. In trying to understand the lived experiences and culture of London-based content creators predominantly through their offline activities and interactions I would somewhat miss the point, which is that they are first and foremost shaped by an online and geographically dispersed culture. For this project, concerned as it is with situating the experiences of London-based content creators within the broader industry context of structures of power and movements of capital, multi-sited online/offline ethnography was identified as ideal to explore the "socially constructed yet technologically mediated landscape" of content creators (Hine, 2017, p. 315), as they moved through both the online social media environment and offline settings where the community-industry converges in person.

As Hine notes, particularly challenging is "mapping out a field site that effectively captures the complexity of online/offline connections [whilst] developing a sufficient degree of immersion and co-presence for a rich understanding to be attained", made all the more complex when studying online cultural spaces that are different for each participant due to algorithmic information filtering (2017, p. 315). Responding to this methodological challenge, I opted to build what Jenna Burrell (2009), drawing on the work of Marcus (1998), calls a "networked field site". The idea here is that rather than having a particular delimited *space* as the organising principle for ethnographic study, one instead maps a *network of connections*. In this way the field site becomes a "network composed of fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects" (Burrell, 2009, p. 189). Whilst this project is a study of London-based content creators, it treats a variety of online and offline spaces as field sites that need to be correlated to one another. A particular strength of the networked field site approach is that it gives the researcher great flexibility to follow leads wherever they go and to map complex, dispersed phenomena; it is an approach "designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtaposition of locations" (Marcus, 1998, p. 90). Researching the

influencer industry involved following threads as they emerged and seizing upon opportunities to interact with creators both online and offline. Importantly, the networked field site "does not imply homogeneity or unity; it implies connection" (Burrell, 2009, p. 189). The multiplicity of experiences and interactions amongst social media content creators defies any neat narrative, and Hine advises ethnographers of internet culture to expect, and even to embrace, uncertainty and multiplicity, due to the "diverse practices of meaning-making around a fragmented internet which is device dependent, culturally embedded, constantly developing, and consists of multiple platforms" (2015, p. 88).

In designing this research, I was deeply inspired by danah boyd's ethnographic research teenagers, particularly in how she combines many different methods and field sites to make sense of how technology fits into their everyday lives, which she describes in detail in 'Making sense of teen life: Strategies for capturing ethnographic data in a networked era' (2016). Like boyd, I incorporated a number of ethnographic methods, woven throughout the 5-year period of data collection (2017-2022), in order to gain a holistic understanding of content creator labour: (1) offline participant observation at key industry events in both London and Anaheim, California, as well as formal and informal content creator meet-ups and events in London; (2) online participant observation of content creators across a wide range of social media platforms; (3) ethnographic semi-structured interviews with 30 London-based content creators and 1 social media marketing executive; and (4) autoethnographic research in the form of becoming a YouTube creator myself, with the aim of gaining first-hand experiential insights into the nature of content creator labour. The most intense period of data collection occurred, by design, in the first two years of the project between February 2018-September 2019, though data collection continued throughout the whole PhD. The research was designed to be digital fieldwork heavy during the first few months, to provide orientation to the field. In June 2018 I posted my first video on my YouTube channel, beginning the formal year of autoethnography. My first offline fieldwork event occurred in February 2018, with a steady stream of events continuing from June 2018. Though I conducted a few interviews in 2018, as opportunities presented themselves, this aspect of the research was planned to ramp up significantly later into 2019, with the interview topic guide informed by themes emergent from online and offline fieldwork. Aside from formal interviews, I gained significant

insights from informal conversations with hundreds of content creators in the field, both online and offline, throughout data collection.

Situating this project in a cultural capital in the Global North had profound implications for its scope in terms of the types of creator experiences it captured. Sitting at the nexus of the cultural industries, major brands and organisations, and the (pre-pandemic) YouTube Space[14], London holds exciting career opportunities and is a draw for many aspiring and professional content creators. However, it is also an extremely expensive place to live relative to other parts of the UK (and the world), exacerbating the precarity of social media work. Whilst this project is geographically situated in London, in order to account for the global USA-centric nature of the influencer industry I made the decision that in addition to London-based fieldwork I would attend VidCon US in Anaheim, California, once a year for three consecutive years (2018-2020)[15]. VidCon US the flagship event of the Euro-American online video industry, with 75,000 attendees in 2019, far bigger than its London counterpart, which I also attended. There are significant overlaps between the UK and USA influencer community-industries—with several of my participants attending VidCon US as invited speakers—and attending this major event provided unparalleled opportunities for researching the highly formalised and commercialised end of the industry. This intermingling of USA and UK creator cultures is reflected throughout the empirical chapters, with online and offline fieldwork drawing at times from USA-based examples, particularly in Chapter 6 where online fieldwork led me to insightful YouTube videos from American creators. American creators tend to have the highest visibility in English-speaking social media contexts, dominating recommended content and leading genre conventions on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, an interesting phenomenon itself worthy of further study, though outside the scope of this project. Whilst some more traditional ethnographers might find this geographic promiscuity methodologically questionable, it is my view that to exclude these insights would be to create a false division between American and UK creators, on platforms where no such division exists.

[14] YouTube announced in February 2021 that it would not be reopening its permanent Spaces in Berlin, London, Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Rio, and Tokyo, which were designed to offer resources and networking opportunities to its creators, after closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[15] Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic VidCon US was cancelled in June 2020, so I was only able to attend twice.

3.3 Data collection: Building a key participant-centred approach

Having settled on a combination of online and offline data collection, then, next came figuring out how to combine them. There is no consistent agreed-upon framework for connecting different field sites to one another in ethnographies of digital culture; as boyd describes (2016, p. 83), some scholars have opted to discretely collect and then synthesise offline and online data (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2002; Orgad, 2009) whereas others have chosen to follow relationships between people as they move between offline and online spaces (Hodkinson, 2002; Kelty, 2008; Wilson, 2006). Despite characterising seamless movement between different environments as analytically ideal for gaining a holistic picture of participants, boyd found this "nearly impossible" in her own study of teens' technology practices, as rampant discourses of online "stranger danger" closed the avenue of reaching out to people online to interview in person (2016, p. 84).

Like boyd, I too found seamless movement between online and offline contexts challenging. I opted for what I'm calling a "key participant-centred" approach to bridge this tricky gap. Though I interacted with hundreds of creators over the course of the research, I identified 30 key participants, detailed in *Appendix 1*. In addition to interacting with and observing my key participants across platforms (discussed in section 3.2.1) and at industry events (discussed in section 3.2.2), I also carried out ethnographic semi-structured interviews with each of them (discussed in section 3.2.3). Crucially, these key participants gave me signed consent to correlate their interview data with their online content and activities. The power of the ethnographic methodology is to understand not just what people *say they do* (their imaginaries and cultural discourses) but also what they *actually do* (cultural practices), and this design provided me the vital ability to analyse interviewees' discourses in conjunction with their online practices. While my key participants feature heavily in the thesis and collectively provided me the greatest insights into the nature of being a content creator, some of the examples I draw on in my analysis are from other creators I encountered during fieldwork, both online and offline, who exemplify a point or argument particularly well but were not interviewed due to lack of access. In addition to creators' discourses and practices, I also sought to understand a third and more elusive dimension, how it *feels* to be a content

creator, so I became a content creator myself as a form of autoethnographic research (discussed in section 3.2.4).

As boyd (2016) outlines, the question of generalisability has been a long-standing debate in anthropological research. Some argue that it is not possible or else should not be the goal (Denzin, 1983), whilst others claim that through conscious sampling, generalisability can be achieved (Hammersley, 1992). I tend to agree with boyd that by working conscientiously to hear diverse perspectives, it is possible to understand a population's cultural logic, or at least achieve a more holistic view. As structural inequalities are central to this project, I made careful decisions about which creators to select as key participants, choosing those who represented a broad range of identity categories in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class and ability, as well as working across a wide variety of prominent and niche genres, including lifestyle, beauty, gaming, BookTube, educational (sex, science and ethnomusicology), daily/weekly vloggers, video essayist (philosophy and cultural studies), animation, LGBTQ+ and feminism, political commentary, reviews (film and tech), travel, trending vlog challenges and tags, comedy, acting tutorials, and short scripted films. I was also interested to understand the disparate experiences of elite professional content creators and small aspiring creators, and so my largest key participant had 2.2 million and my smallest had a single solitary subscriber (me!). In some cases, I chose creators who I had watched online for many years, and others were those who I'd met in the field and who had interesting or different perspectives to other participants. Some selections were made based on access, either having it or not having it (discussed in section 3.2.2.1). Having laid out the overarching research design, in the following sections I explore in greater depth each strand of data collection.

3.3.1 Multi-(web)sited digital ethnography: An ecological approach to the platform environment

It quickly became clear to me upon starting fieldwork that it would be insufficient to have YouTube as my only online field site because content creators do not understand themselves in terms of singular platforms, but rather as multi-media, multi-platform brands. They are constantly trying to figure out what is the best use of their time in terms of what types of content to post on what platform, how best to interact with their audiences, and what types

of paid work to engage in (explored further in chapter 4). Thus, this thesis understands social media as a dynamic interrelated system of platforms each with its own cultural meanings, practices and affordances, taking inspiration from Madianou and Miller's (2011) ecological "polymedia" approach.

Throughout the full 5-years of the project, I voraciously consumed media produced by content creators, spending at least an hour every day watching their videos, reading their posts, and observing their interactions with audiences across a plethora of social media platforms: YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, Facebook, Twitter, Discord, Patreon, and personal newsletters and blogs. Though all forms of data collection provided vital insights, I consider this online participant observation to be the most critical and enduring aspect of the project, without which none of the other elements could follow or be contextualised. It was through immersion in the online worlds of content creators that I came to understand the norms, conventions, and relative significance of the various genres of content that ended up determining key participant selection, and to "speak the language" of my participants, which proved invaluable in offline fieldwork and interviews, enabling me to understand cultural references and participate in conversations more fully. I have no doubt that this went a long way to granting me "insider" status with the London creator community, essential for access to private spaces and interviewees (discussed further in section 3.3.2.1).

In this practice of consuming online media, as with every other part of data collection, I plunged myself fully in the anthropological sensibility of long-term fieldwork, always actively reflecting on what content creators were doing, conveying, performing, and eliciting through their content. I also took note of the broader patterns of social media, staying abreast of changes over time by noting shifting content trends, the rise and fall of A-list influencers, and changes in the platform ecology at a macro level. For example, mid-way through my data collection, TikTok burst onto the scene to swiftly become one of the most popular platforms in the West, and I responsively adapted my research design to encompass this new player that gave rise to its own set of discourses, practices, and concerns for my participants.

I actively sought out wide-ranging content, striving to understand the influencer industry broadly and to break out of the norm in social media research of focussing on singlular (and

often heavily gendered) popular genres, most notably beauty and lifestyle, on the one hand, and gaming, on the other. This is where the networked field site really came into its own, allowing me the latitude to go down rabbit holes as they caught my interest. For example, at one point I became engrossed in a particular family vlogging channel, consuming their everyday lives through hour-long vlogs multiple times a week and following their daily journey on Instagram stories. At another point I became especially engaged with various BreadTube[16] channels, watching critical leftist video essays on such topics as philosophy, race, gender, capitalism and politics. On the face of it these two genres have little in common, but in talking to the creators who produce them I found more similarities than expected. I believe this ability to talk across genres, to find shared experiences as well as overarching patterns of exclusion in the influencer industry, to be one of the main strengths and contributions of the project.

Throughout online fieldwork I actively tried to break out of my own algorithmically determined feeds, adjusting my media consumption throughout data collection to reflect the creators that I met in offline settings, aware that what I was seeing did not look the same as each of my participants (Hine, 2017, p. 317). Despite my attempts to gain a holistic understanding of the platform ecology, YouTube continued to be my primary platform of data collection throughout the project, reflecting my participants' assertions that YouTube was *their* primary platform. While I recognise that this is somewhat a chicken and egg situation—YouTube was my primary platform of data collection and therefore the place that I was most likely to find creators whose primary platform would be YouTube—I maintain that this provided a solid research design for understanding content creator labour within the wider influencer industry due to repeated assertions at industry events regarding YouTube's ongoing primacy from creators and social media professionals alike. By the end of the project, building on more than a decade of passionate engagement with YouTube culture, I was subscribed to 994 channels, reflecting the broad base of knowledge that this project builds on.

[16] The name BreadTube is a reference to the anarcho-communist book *The Conquest of Bread* (Kropotkin, 1892), known colloquially as "The Bread Book".

3.3.1.1 Platforms, algorithms, metrics: Understanding technologies as culture

An important aspect of this project is understanding the experiences, interactions and feelings that creators have with and about the social media platforms that they work across, an epistemological challenge (*what is the nature of the relationships between humans, technologies and culture?*) as much as it is a methodological one (*how can I study these relationships?*). This thesis adopts a socio-technological approach, understanding people and technologies to be mutually co-constituted. As Miller and Slater put it, "the Internet" cannot be reduced to a thing called "society", or vice versa, "everything that is important is what happens in the mediations that dissolve [the] dualisms of sociologism and technologism" (2000, p. 8). Following Hine, this project understands the landscape of social media platforms to be socially constructed, in that "people make it real to one another in interaction, interpret it for one another and make it meaningful in their daily practices" (2017, p. 324).

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth exploration of "The Algorithm," a prominent character in the lives of content creators. Here, I am inspired especially by Nick Seaver's seminal piece on the ethnography of algorithmic systems, in which he presents a vision of algorithms *as* culture, rather than *in* culture:

> Like other aspects of culture, algorithms are enacted by practices which do not heed a strong distinction between technical and non-technical concerns, but rather blend them together. In this view, algorithms are not singular technical objects that enter into many different cultural interactions, but are rather unstable objects, culturally enacted by the practices people use to engage with them. (2017, p. 5)

Ethnography is particularly well suited as a methodology for understanding sociotechnical assemblages, constituted through the discourses, experiences and practices of people and institutions. Inspired by Seaver's approach, I investigate not what The Algorithm does or how it works in some objective sense, but the diverse cultural meanings and values that content creators attach to it: how they *understand* what it is and what it does, how they *feel* about, *experience* and *act* in response to it, and how platforms, the influencer industry and the

nature of platformised creative work are all in a state of constant becoming through this process.

While algorithms receive considerable focussed attention in this thesis, I bring this same ethnographic approach to the other sociotechnological aspects of content creators' working lives, including platform architectures and metrics.

3.3.2 "It's just like a huge, weird friendship group": IRL events and hanging out with creators

My offline fieldwork encompassed attending both mainstream industry conventions (VidCon US and London and Summer in the City) and smaller community-organised groups and events, most notably the London Small YouTubers, a community organisation for small creators (<20,000 subscribers).

Figure 3: VidCon US entrance in Anaheim, California, July 2019

Figure 4: VidCon London entrance banner, February 2020

At the industry conventions, I observed creators as they interacted with their fans at meet and greets (*Fig.6*) and as they talked to one another and industry professionals on panels about all manner of issues, trends, and challenges in their work (*Fig.5*). These conventions were also replete with loud, garish, and absurdly commercialised expo halls. The expo hall at VidCon US was particularly enormous, with booths for a very large number of Viacom-owned companies: Nickelodeon (a major sponsor of the event) and MTV, as well as other non-video related companies such as M&M's and Extra gum (*Fig.7*).

Figure 5: "How to Stay Productive Without Burning Out" panel at VidCon UK, February 2020

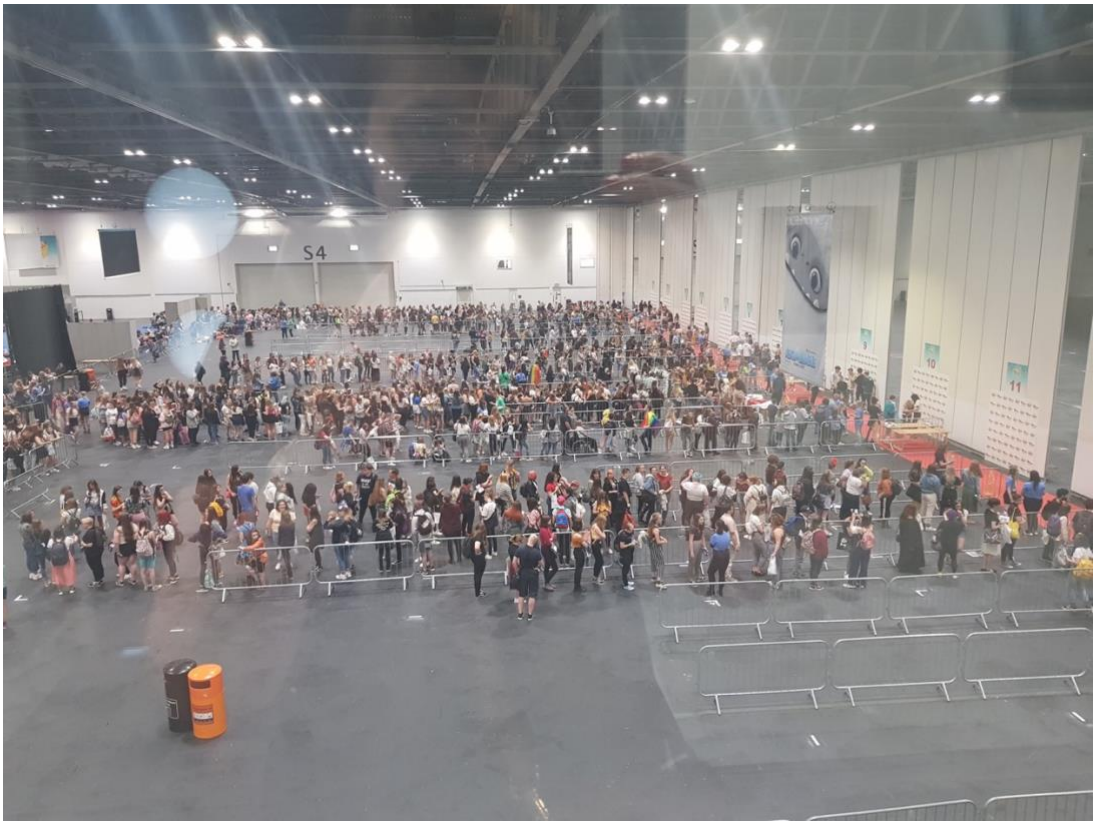

Figure 6: Creator Meet and Greet queues at Summer in the City, August 2019

Figure 7: The expo hall at VidCon US, July 2019

In attending these events, a full list of which can be found in *Appendix 4*, I aimed to build an understanding of the sociocultural and commercial dynamics of the influencer industry, beyond what was readily apparent through creators' content and interactions online. In line with findings of previous cultural industries research, I found that in the influencer industry the boundaries of work and play, of community and industry, are profoundly collapsed, and success is dependent to a large extent on informal networks of collaboration (Gill, 2002), a compounding factor for structural inequalities in the industry, discussed further in the next chapter. In this context, I was interested in questions such as who is part of the industry "inner circle"? Who gets invited to events? Who is excluded, and why?

The longer I spent in the field, the clearer it became that the UK influencer industry is characterised by a tight-knit group of predominantly white, middle-class creators, who are repeatedly invited to speak at conventions by platforms and other stakeholders such as social media talent and marketing agencies, as well as being offered other opportunities such as brand deals. Further, it was striking how white, middle class and male almost all the industry-track attendees at events in the UK and USA were: agents, influencer marketing managers and network executives searching for new talent to work with. These events are important spaces for content creators trying to further their careers and there are persistent problems relating to cultural fit and social capital with regards to who can navigate these spaces successfully. Attendees at community initiatives such as London Small YouTubers meetings, on the other hand, were noticeably more diverse. These issues of diversity in the London community-industry are foundational to the analysis presented in Chapters 4-6.

3.3.2.1 Gatekeepers, elite creators, friendship: Challenges of access and power dynamics between knower and known

I begin this section with a reflection on my first trip to VidCon US in Anaheim, California in June 2018, undoubtedly the lowest point of my fieldwork experience. I knew no one and struggled profoundly to get my foot in the door, so to speak, with any of the high-profile creators who I had gone there in the hopes of meeting. This was my first experience of the extreme hierarchy at large-scale influencer events, with 75,000 attendees at VidCon US that year. There were different badges that allowed access to different 'tracks' at the event. As an

Industry-track attendee, the most expensive badge that could be purchased for $850, above Community and Creator badges, I had access to the talks and panels across all three tracks. I had naively assumed that this would enable me to speak to high-profile creators, but it turned out that invited creators were not allowed to walk on any of the regular floors for safety reasons[17], and there were several levels above Industry track that could not be purchased, which enabled access to the backstage areas, for example "Speaker", "Featured Creator" and "All Access". Without these badges, I was unable to be in the same physical spaces as any of the invited creators, outside of the context of listening to them speaking on panels or performing. As I discovered, there were exclusive parties that happened each evening that VIPs were invited to attend, such as one put on by YouTube at the convention centre and one by Patreon at the Hyatt hotel. All of this culminated in extreme frustration and a constant feeling that I wasn't where the "action" was, my reason for having flown all the way to California for VidCon US being precisely to interact with A-List content creators, which the UK scene has fewer of. In hindsight, met with these closed doors and issues of access, I should have focussed my energy on speaking to more of the creators who were attending the less exclusive Creator-track.

My experiences with access to high-profile content creators and the established inner circle of the London influencer community-industry was a little less difficult than breaking into the more overwhelming American scene. Below is an excerpt from my first offline fieldwork trip, at a trendy venue in East London for YouTube's Creators for Change Summit in January 2018:

> I stood around feeling uncomfortable and not knowing who to speak to. It seemed that many of the attendees knew each other and were having animated conversations that I didn't want to interrupt. I was excited to see that there were six British YouTubers present who I had been hoping to meet there. If all went to plan, I would leave the event having made a good first impression, with them giving me their email addresses and agreeing to be interviewed at a later date for my PhD. I started to plan how I might strike up conversations with them as the day progressed, deciding not to

[17] The year before, high profile creator Logan Paul caused a dangerous swarm of fans when he announced a treasure hunt in the public Community-track areas, prompting a change of policy.

be too forward as it might be off-putting. I wanted to present myself as friendly and approachable, but also as slightly detached, an interested scholar and an equal, rather than as a fan. (Fieldnotes from Creators for Change Summit, January 2018)

These fieldnotes capture some of my nerves and anticipation at standing in a room for the first time with content creators who I had watched online for nearly a decade at that point. I was able to attend the Creators for Change Summit by a stroke of good fortune via my supervisor (via a Google employee) and at the time it felt as though the success of my whole PhD hinged upon my ability to forge connections with these creators, my perception (correctly) being that YouTube events are difficult to gain access to, and that this might be a rare opportunity to meet certain successful YouTubers in person. This was the first of many instances throughout fieldwork where I had to navigate talking to people who I knew an awful lot about, having watched their lives online, but who did not know me.

Figure 8: Jazza John (left), Taha Khan (middle) and I in Riga, Latvia for the UNESCO Media Information and Literacy Week, October 2018

Many of the higher-profile content creators I met throughout the project were understandably wary upon first meeting me. As people in the public eye, they were used to enquiries from journalists and other interested parties trying to extract information from them about their personal lives, possibly even trying to catch them out or represent them in a bad light. In the green room at industry events, away from the prying and adoring eyes of fans, it was clear that these creators simply wanted to relax with their friends and not have to be "on". In this sense, I consider it an immense stroke of luck that I met Jazza John and Taha Khan early on during fieldwork in the UK, who later became friends and confidants (*Fig. 8*). Both brought me in to the London creator community, which they were firmly embedded within. Jazza invited me as a plus one to several industry events, which provided me with invaluable backstage access to exclusive spaces sponsored by platforms where industry professionals and creators mingled (*Fig. 9*), and more importantly a social "in" in green rooms and at private parties to connect with high-profile creators, many of whom became key participants. Taha also introduced me to many high-profile creators and shared his perspective on diversity in the industry, as discussed at the start of this chapter, which had a profound impact on the trajectory of the project.

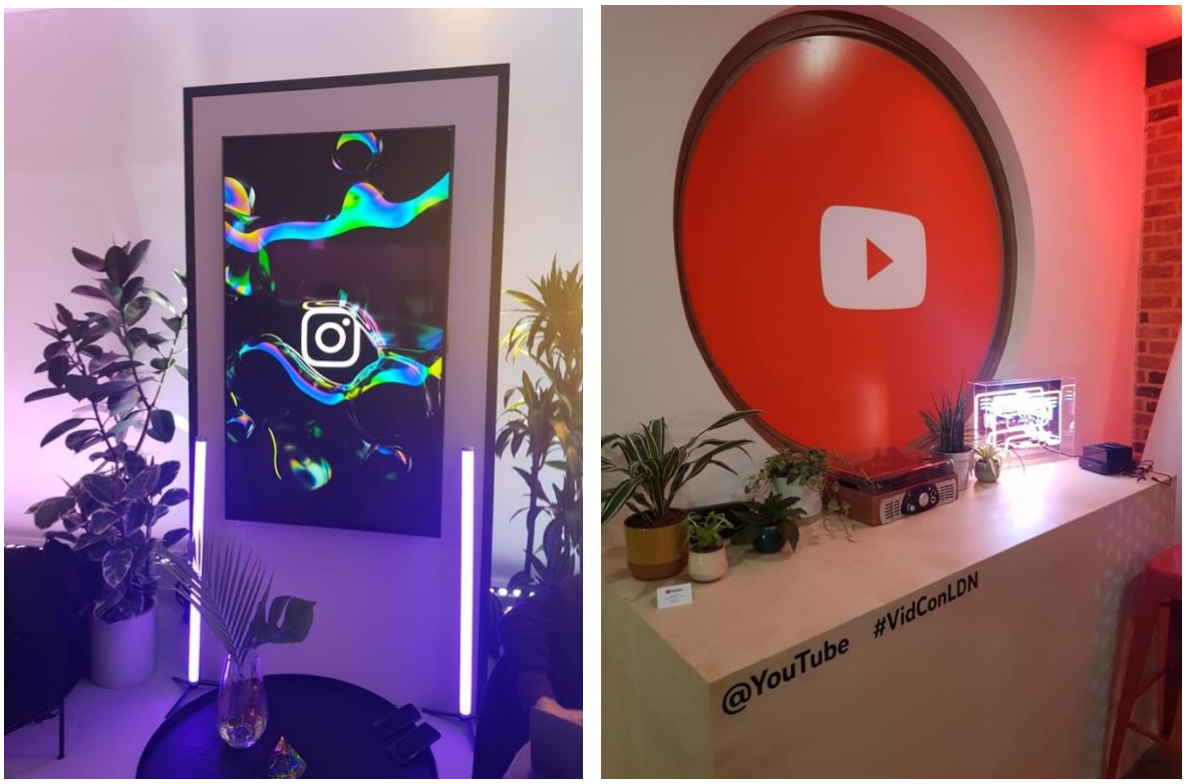

Figure 9: Backstage Instagram and YouTube lounges at VidCon London, February 2020

I have no doubt that Jazza and Taha's "sponsorship" went a long way to granting me insider status in the UK influencer community-industry, as the creators they introduced me to tended to let their guards down more readily (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007, p. 47). Even with the sponsorship of Jazza and Taha, there were a few creators who did not agree to be interviewed until I had become firmly embedded at industry events, having met them multiple times over more than two years. I found that there was a snowball effect that occurred: once a creator heard that I had interviewed a couple of their friends, they were much happier to participate. The important thing for me was to understand the relational networks, so I knew who to namedrop when approaching each person, a process which became easier the longer I spent in the field. There were others still who never agreed to participate, despite my best efforts. I wrote the following fieldnotes after attending one of my final offline fieldwork events in August 2019, which demonstrate the journey I went on from outsider to insider status in the UK community-industry:

> I want to take a moment to consider my own position in the content creator scene and how it has changed over time, as I'm approaching the end of offline fieldwork. I feel that I am a community insider now. I know lots of people and they greeted me today as a friend at this SitC, a far cry from where I started at my first offline industry event. Taha even introduced me to Elle Mills[18] today as "the only person studying YouTube who gets it", which was not the first time this has happened. It's very flattering and I think testament to the power of long-term ethnographic research. While their friendship and support have been invaluable, I don't feel like I need Jazza and Taha to introduce me to people anymore in order to make connections. This time last year I was tethered only to them, as though I would float away if they cut ties, but now I have a strong web of connections, overlapping but not dependent on any one person or group. At the pub tonight I was talking to some smaller creators, who have been attending SitC for many years. One asked me how I talk to big creators without positioning myself as a fan, which is what she wants to do but struggles with, particularly because she's younger, aged 20. She talked about how she wouldn't approach bigger creators on the convention floor because she didn't want to be

[18] Elle Mills is a famous LGBTQ+ Canadian YouTuber with 1.75 million subscribers as of October 2022.

> misidentified as a “fangirl”. I think that in this regard, being identified as an academic has been to my advantage. In demonstrating my genuine scholarly passion for YouTube culture and the plight of content creators, I’m understood by creators as a friendly, semi-professional presence, not there as a fan, and not there to try to extract monetary value, labour or “klout” from them. (Fieldnotes from Summer in the City, August 2019)

Gaining access to elite creators and exclusive events was challenging, as many other researchers of influencer cultures have found, but an essential aspect of this research, which sought to understand the dynamics of privilege and marginalisation in the industry. I attribute what I broadly deem to be my success in this regard to the following factors: (1) maintaining a constant presence at events and online over a number of years; (2) demonstrating my positionality as a long-time YouTube culture enthusiast and member of the community; (3) expressing an understanding for the struggles of aspiring and professional content creators and taking their labour seriously as such; and (4) explicitly aligning myself with creators through my autoethnographic YouTube channel, rather than with industry professionals or fans. In short, fully immersing myself in the (at times arduous) practice of long-term ethnographic fieldwork.

However, it is also important to recognise the impact that my identity and positionality had on my access journey. As Skeggs explored in her own ethnographic journey with young women in educational settings, “the establishment of friendships requires reciprocity, time, confidence, intimacy and disclosure” and her own similarities to her participants in terms of sexuality and gender made this process much more straightforward (1994, p. 78). In my case, it was not just my identity as a white, middle-class woman in her late 20s/early 30s, but also my educational background, interests and left-wing political leanings that made it far easier to gain the confidence and even friendship of many creators in the London community-industry, in that I was easily recognisable as an insider to them. The relationships that I was able to cultivate with my research participants aligns with feminist approaches, that seeks to redress the power imbalances between researchers and their research “subjects”, who some even suggest “can and should become full collaborators in feminist research” (Stacey, 1988, p. 22, referencing Bowles and Duelli Klein, 1983; Mies, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983). Radhika

Gajjala's (2002) postcolonial and feminist approach to cyberethnography was a particular inspiration, encouraging me never to assume to know more than my participants or have a more sophisticated understanding. Though many of my participants had different identities to me, throughout fieldwork and interviews I rarely felt the need to censor myself, finding that they were usually likeminded and motivated by similar questions, opinions and concerns. In this way, it was easy to cultivate a situation where participants became co-constructors of meaning: many were interested to discuss issues such as precarity, inequalities and commercialisation in the influencer industry, and some even to engage with the feminist frameworks and concerns that motivated my enquiry.

However, such a collaborative and egalitarian approach is not always possible, as in ethnographies where the culture being studied is at odds with feminist principles, or even when the ethnographer it at risk herself. For example, we can see a clear difference between my experience and O'Neill's, in her ethnography of the seduction industry, who found that her fieldwork was "predicated on a willingness to silence herself" and "absorb sexism and misogyny" (2018, p. 179). Further, I tried to remain mindful throughout the research process, that in striving to collaborativeness and egalitarianism, "feminist researchers are apt to suffer the delusion of alliance more than the delusion of separateness" (Stacey, 1988, p. 25). At times, in seeking to find points of connection and agreement between myself and my research participants, I may have inadvertently minimised differences or divergences. In reflecting back on the process of fieldwork, it is also fair to say that I naturally gravitated more towards those creators with whom I shared ideas and who showed interest in the project, meaning that the voices of creators who were more critical of the structures of the influencer industry are more prominent in the analysis that follows. Of course, it is widely acknowledged that "ethnographic truths are inherently partial" and always subject to the biography of the researcher (Clifford, 1986, p. 7), which is why it is crucial to recognise the ways in which one's own biases and interests impact the research process.

3.3.3 Ethnographic semi-structured interviews: Making sense of divergent backgrounds, experiences and aspirations

Ethnographic semi-structured interviews provided vital insights into the lives of my key participants, allowing me to understand their motivations, interpretations, histories, and aspirations in relation to what I had gleaned through participant observation (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). Interviews were structured loosely into six overarching themes—which built from my initial research design and were augmented through fieldwork—with a lot of freedom for interviewees to diverge from these themes depending on their personal experiences and interests: (1) personal history; (2) money and career; (3) cross-platform cultures; (4) technological concerns (metrics, analytics, algorithms, etc.); (5) audience relationships; and (5) the future. My full interview topic guide is available in *Appendix 3*. Before each interview I did a deep dive on the participant's YouTube channel(s) and other social media outputs so that I could tailor our conversation to them. I adjusted the interview topic guide according to my relationship to the participant, their content style and genre, their levels of professionalism, and myriad other factors. What made these interviews ethnographic in nature was my goal to understand the world from participants' points of view rather than to answer a very rigid set of predetermined questions, situating them in conjunction with online and offline participant observation (boyd, 2016, p. 89). I worked to make interviews friendly, informal, and collaborative, reflecting my research ethic of equality between researcher and participant. Interviews took place wherever the participant decided they felt most comfortable, most commonly at cafes or pubs but also at their workplace, my university, and over Skype/Zoom when necessary. I gave participants as much time as they wanted to speak, practicing attentiveness to their energy levels and enthusiasm, and accordingly interviews ranged between one and three and a half hours.

It was through these interviews that I gained a true appreciation for the sheer variety of experiences that people have when making and sharing content on social media platforms. Every interview started with the open-ended question "Tell me about your history with YouTube and online video". This usually resulted in prolonged and fascinating personal histories detailing wildly different experiences of and motivations for getting into content creation. Some made content for its own sake: for artistic reasons, for community, to educate, to entertain. Most were seeking visibility, recognition and income as content creators in their own right, whilst others were wannabe actors, makeup artists, writers, singers, and filmmakers, hoping that they would be able to leverage their online audience and visibility to

launch creative careers outside of social media. There was a noticeable distinction between those who had adopted content creation in the early days, without any sense that it could become a job, and those who had started more recently with a specifically entrepreneurial attitude. Rather than flatten out or suggest that there is a universal model to explain content creator labour, this thesis is motivated by a desire to situate my participants' experiences within broader sociocultural, technological, and commercial structures in order to understand how the influencer industry provides both openings and foreclosures for specific kinds of participation.

3.3.4 Autoethnography: Becoming a YouTuber and the visceral pain of invisibility

Fieldwork and interviews provided me with insights into creator labour at the level of discourses and practices, but accessing the experiential dimension, or how it *feels* to be a content creator, proved more difficult methodologically. Ethnography advocates the "researcher-as-instrument" approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007), meaning that the researcher is both the primary data collection instrument and the interpreter of the meaning of data. Although this methodology has a long and rich history in offline research, social media platforms as cultural field sites continually present novel challenges for participant observation. As Hine notes, it is difficult to achieve "co-presence" in ethnographies of digital spaces, as interactions are unpredictable, ephemeral, and often private (2017). This requires the researcher to ask what it really means to *participate* in these contexts? It is far easier to be a passive critical observer, or "lurker", on social media platforms than an active participant.

For this project, inspired by the innovative work of anthropologists in digital spaces (Boellstorff, 2008; Lange, 2014; 2019; Nardi, 2010), I concluded that it was insufficient to merely watch, like and comment on videos; I needed to become a content creator myself as a form of autoethnography. Taking the self-reflexivity of the ethnographic method one step further, autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997), using one's own experience as a primary source of data. This allows the researcher access to the embodied, emotional, and experiential dimensions of the culture

being studied, famously exemplified by Loïc Wacquant's classic text about becoming a boxer in Chicago's South Side, in which he makes a case for a "carnal sociology" capable of capturing "the taste and ache of action" (2004).

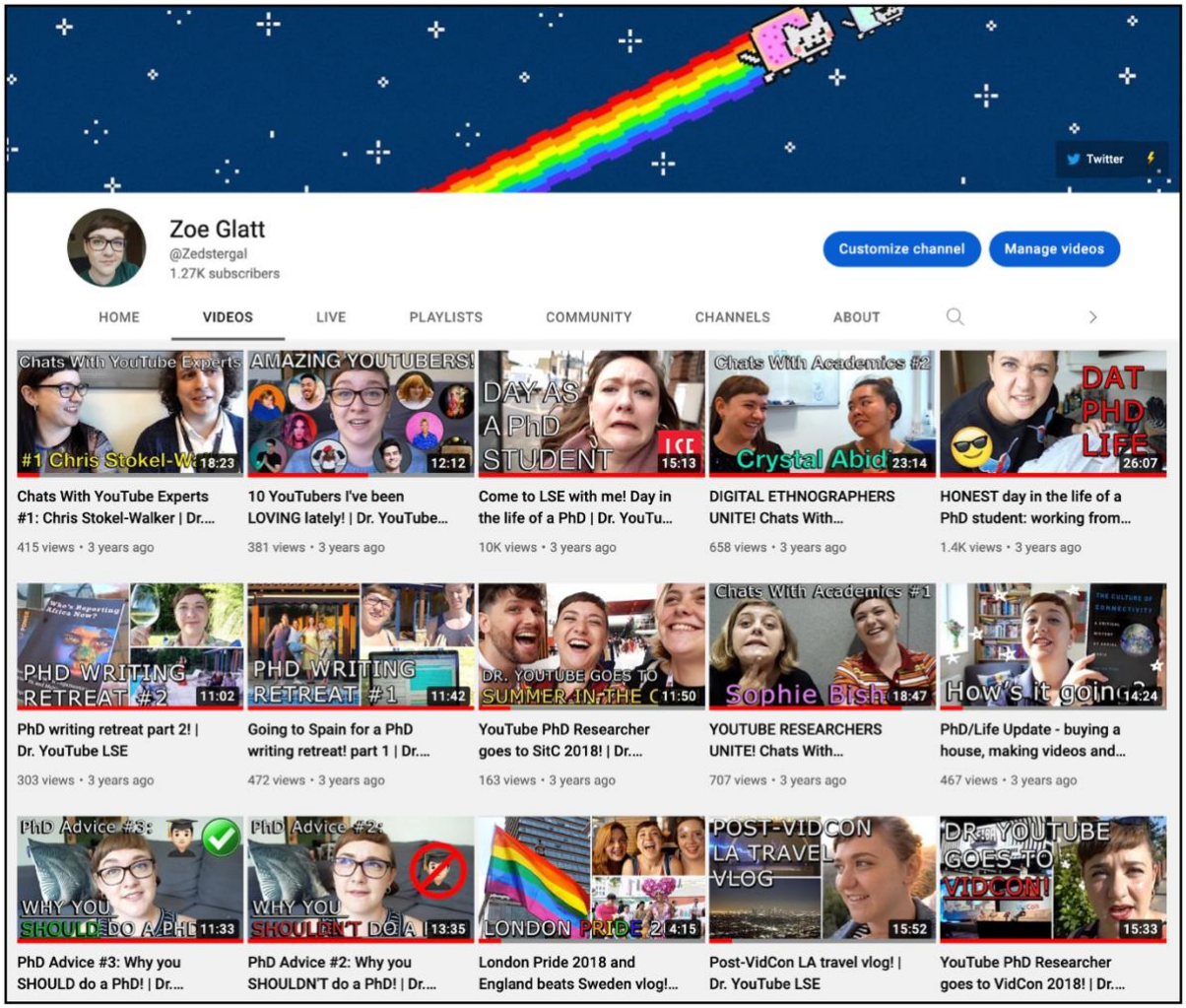

Figure 10: Screenshot of my YouTube channel, taken in May 2022

In June 2018, I posted my first video entitled "Introducing my PhD!" (Zoe Glatt, 2018a). For the following year I posted regular videos across a range of topics, mirroring the styles and genre conventions of other creators. My videos have included vlogs of conferences and fieldwork trips to industry conventions, reflections on my research progress, advice and "day in the life" style videos about being a PhD student, and collaborations with other internet culture researchers and journalists in my "Chats with Academics" and "Chats with YouTube Experts" series.

In approaching my own channel, I actively tried to inhabit the industry discourses, practices, and sensibilities that I had gleaned during fieldwork and interviews. By deliberately internalising the pervasive neoliberal logics that permeate the influencer industry, I was able to gain insights into the trials and tribulations of what it means to be a content creator. While I started out my channel with what I thought was a relatively modest goal of posting one video a week, when met with a lack of growth and the sheer task of producing regular content alongside other work, my motivation and energy quickly waned and the gaps between uploads became longer and longer. I found myself getting stressed about uploading rather than enjoying it and feeling guilty and frustrated when I failed to hit upload deadlines, knowing that it would negatively impact my likelihood of being recommended YouTube's algorithms, a feeling that many of my participants had also shared with me. Running my own channel gave me a powerful sense of empathy for creators who expressed feelings of creative exhaustion and burnout from the pressures of an income dependent on posting a never-ending stream on content week on week, year on year.

Throughout this period, I wrote regular fieldnotes about my experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Reflections included the disappointment of a video doing badly and the excitement I felt when someone left a positive comment, deep dives into my channel analytics, and extensive musings on "The Algorithm". The most noteworthy empirical finding that came from this autoethnographic research was an appreciation of the role of analytic quantification in the working lives of content creators, explored further in the next chapter. Despite starting this methodological experiment with no strong feelings about how many subscribers or views I wanted to achieve, I was surprised by how easily I became emotionally invested in my visibility and metric success, or lack thereof. A little over a year after starting my channel, I wrote the following fieldnotes:

> I've been circling around this idea of the primacy of analytics, metrics and algorithms for content creators for a long time now. These topics are completely unavoidable in any gathering of YouTube creators or influencer industry professionals talking about their work. The back end of the YouTube platform (YouTube Studio) is rife with an overwhelming amount of analytic data. Creators have told me about how stressful it is to be confronted with a barrage of numbers, in red if their current video is

performing less well than their previous videos, and I have experienced this first-hand with my own channel. This obsessive self-scrutiny in terms of metrics and analytics, and the precarity that comes with a job completely reliant on ever-changing popularity metrics and mysterious algorithms, seems to mark a significant shift in creative labour. (Autoethnographic fieldnotes, August 16th 2019)

Fig. 11 below shows a screenshot from my own YouTube Studio, just a small glimpse into the data made available to creators, which they are encouraged to engage with.

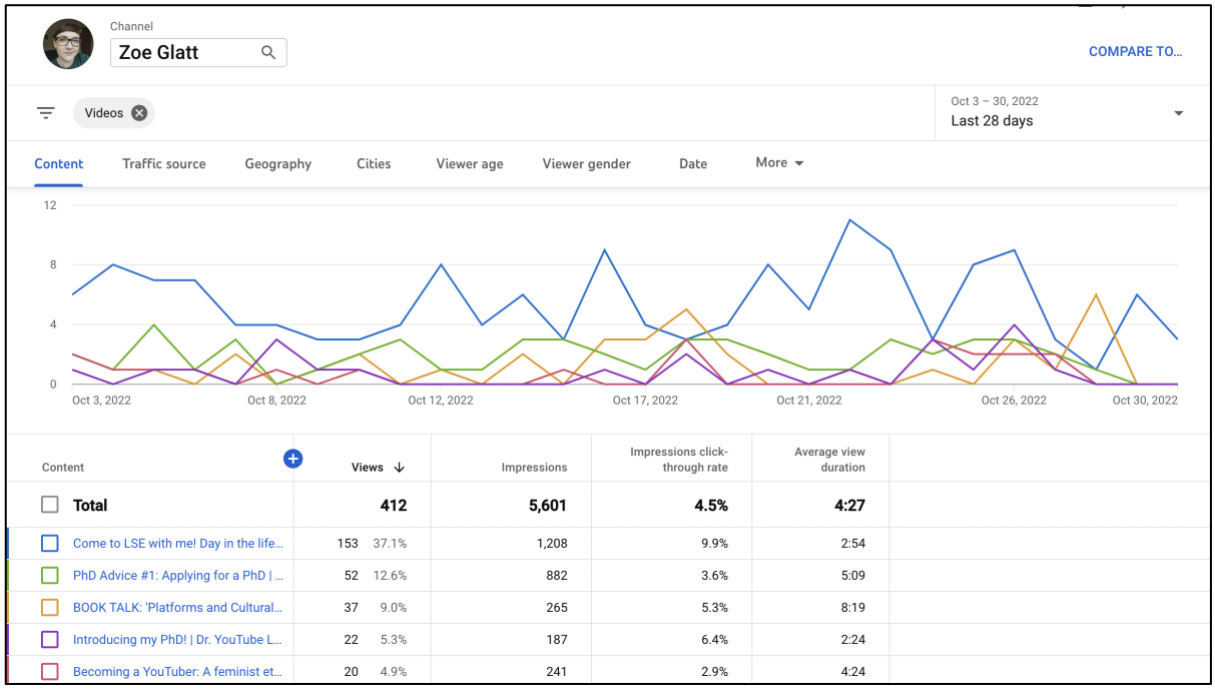

Figure 11: Screenshot of YouTube Studio, taken in October 2022

Autoethnography as a method of qualitative enquiry has polarised scholars across a number of disciplines in recent years, with some criticising it for being narcissistic, introspective, individualised and self-indulgent (Stahlke Wall, 2016). Further, researchers have questioned the extent to which doing something yourself can really tell you much at all about *how others experience that thing*. It is important to note that autoethnography served only as a supplement to fieldwork and interviews, and not a replacement. Nonetheless, the practice of becoming a YouTuber had empirical, instrumental, and ethical value for the project. Empirically, it provided me with significant insights into the labour of online creators, from the ways in which they interact with channel metrics and the multi-platform environment, to

the emotional highs and lows of trying to cultivate an audience, and vital access to the back end of platforms that are not visible to audiences. When someone told me that The Algorithm was frustrating or that producing and editing content was time consuming, I could empathise in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. As Hine puts it, in "taking part for real… I experience how it feels in a visceral way that would be hard to access in an interview or observational setting" (2015, p. 99). Thus, becoming a YouTuber helped to break down the boundary between myself as a researcher and my participants. Instrumentally, it helped me to be seen as an insider by other creators, allowing me to become more embedded within the community, and I was granted access to conversations and interviews as a result. On an ethical level, becoming a YouTuber was a process of inviting vulnerability and exposure in order to understand the emotional dimensions of the work of content creators. It was a way to redress the usual power dynamics between researcher and participant and to dive into the practise as a novice, to be humbled, to look inexpert, to fail, to open myself up to critique and feedback. As franzke et al. put it, "Rather than only extracting data, collaborative data analysis values users as experts over their own practices and attempts to maintain connections between researchers and people under study" (2020, p. 69). I actively invited member-checks about the project in my YouTube videos, with the aim to improve its transparency and public accountability.

Whilst I am critical of the neoliberal logics undergirding the influencer industry, and the structures that support certain creators whilst marginalising others, I have nothing but admiration for the sheer force of will that all creators need to possess in order to grow their channels from the ground up. In line with Duffy's research (2017), I found that the stereotype of the *lazy influencer*—getting paid to sit around and post the occasional makeup review or gaming livestream—could not be much further from the truth. It took me six months of uploading regularly to reach 219 subscribers and after one year I had only 321. It wasn't until February 2021, after more than two and a half years, that I reached that initial minor landmark of 1000 subscribers, the minimum requirement to join the YouTube Partner Programme and start earning advertising revenue on content (though it would be pennies based on the number of views I was receiving, if I had decided to enable that feature). Considering that anyone with fewer than 20k subscribers is considered a "small" creator, and it's hard to earn any sort of reasonable living with fewer than 300k subscribers, the initial hurdle in starting a

career as a content creator on YouTube seems almost insurmountable. Six months into the autoethnographic research, I wrote: "It is as though I am standing at the bottom of a mountain looking up, and the top is out of sight beyond the clouds."

3.4 Consent and a feminist ethics of care

This project adopts a feminist ethics of care, understanding the protection of participants from harm to be of utmost importance and following the general principle that "the greater the vulnerability of our subjects, the greater our responsibility and obligation to protect them from likely harms" (Ibid.: 17). This was made complex by the need to correlate key participants' interview data with publicly available and searchable online content, meaning that their identities are not anonymised, as outlined in section 3.2. Therefore, my primary source for ethical advice for data collection and analysis was the Association of Internet Researchers' *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0* (franzke et al., 2020), which deals with the complexities of online/offline dynamics in the research process, and which views ethics as much more than a tick-box exercise to pass ethics review boards or reducible to platforms' Terms of Service. The document highlights the challenges of negotiating concepts such as harm, vulnerability and public/private in relation to ethical considerations in internet research and endorse a highly context-specific approach.

According to the American Anthropological Association's *Code of Ethics*, "it is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant" (2009, p. 3), meaning that consent does not necessarily need to be written, but that the participant must have a clear understanding of what they are consenting to. Nonetheless, all key participants signed a consent form (outlined in *Appendix 2*), which included the following stipulations:

(1) 'My name, job title and place of work may be identified in the final report, and I waive the right to anonymity for the purposes of this research.

(2) 'I understand that the project may refer to my YouTube videos or other social media posts in conjunction with the interview transcript, and I consent to use of this material as part of the project.'

The consent process is continuous, meaning that it needs to be confirmed with participants throughout the project, not just at the outset. Ethics and consent have different procedures and ramifications in online and offline ethnography. Whilst the ethics procedures for offline participant observation are well established, involving ongoing verbal or written consent, what constitutes ethical practises in online research is much debated. This is due to the ambiguities inherent in what constitutes public and private space online, as well as the practical difficulties in obtaining informed consent on platforms that do not offer its easy facilitation. An important aspect of this research project was the collection and analysis of video data in the form of screenshots and fieldnotes. Based on AoIR's recommendations (franzke et al., 2020), I concluded that there weren't any major ethical issues in collecting such data without informed consent, as creators are putting out content on platforms that are actively understood to be public spaces with the intent to garner an audience.

On the other hand, though there is research precedent for the collection and analysis of comments on public platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Twitter (for example, Cocker and Cronin, 2017; Jensen and Laurie, 2016), I decided not to quote audience comments in this thesis. While I spent much of my online fieldwork reading such comments, as a vital means to understand the relationship between creators and their audiences, it felt ethically problematic to include them directly in the analysis without consent, particularly as I had no way of ascertaining whether commenters were minors. While content creators put out content with the explicit intent for people to view and engage with it, the same cannot necessarily be said for commenters. It is not possible to anonymise direct quotations of comments in research outputs; even if one removes the username, the text of the comment itself can be searched on Google, and the user can be identified. It would be possible to convey the meaning of any sensitive comments whilst paraphrasing to maintain the anonymity of commenters, but as the focus of this thesis is on the experiences of creators themselves, it made more sense to understand audiences through creators' reflections during interviews and fieldwork.

As explored in section 3.3.2.1, in line with feminist approaches that eschew the dualism between knower and known and seek to redress the imbalances of power in the research process, I developed intimacy and friendly ongoing relationship with several of my

participants. However, Stacey provides a compelling critique of the very idea that feminist ethnographers should seek to cultivate such intimacy with participants, highlighting the deep irony that "ethnographic methods also subject research subjects to greater risk of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment by the researcher than does much positivist research" (1988, p. 21). Whilst I agree that this is indeed a crucial consideration in the design and execution of ethnographic research, such dynamics are heavily dependent on the context of the research project in question. During the research I found that the ambiguity in my relationship to participants was reduced considerably due to the industry context of my field sites and the community in question, as compared to ethnographies set in more intimate home settings. Everyone in these spaces, with the exception of fans, were there in a professional capacity—creators, talent managers, journalists, marketing executives, platform and brand representatives—and I seemed to be understood by many as just another industry stakeholder. This perception was likely enhanced by the friendship I struck up with social media journalist Chris Stokel-Walker, who I would regularly spend time with at events and with whom I discussed various aspects of industry dynamics, often with content creators too. By some creators we were seen fondly as a sort of social media expert double act. Further, as I found during fieldwork and interviews, content creators are either used to being or desire to be in the public eye, and most, if not all, seemed to enjoy sharing their experiences and perspectives. For example, none of my participants raised any concerns whatsoever about signing the consent from, that allowed me to name them and correlate their interview data to their online content, which I had anticipated might be at least queried by some.

However, the risk of exploitation, betrayal and abandonment was still present, particularly as this project concerns the sensitive dynamics of marginalisation and exclusions in the industry. I attempted to mitigate harms in two key ways. Firstly, though the nature of the project changed over and time as I gathered data and refined my arguments, I tried to be as transparent with my participants as possible about the project as it stood when I talked to them. Secondly, in line with the principle of ongoing informed consent, I sent all excerpts of the thesis where I identified key participants to that person so that they had the opportunity to read it and give feedback, or else remove their consent. Whilst this made the writing process longer and the work more at risk of crumbling if a participant did not like or disagreed with what I had said, I believe it ultimately made the project stronger, more ethically sound,

and more reflective of the true experiences of my participants and the influencer industry more broadly. In the majority of cases, participants were happy with what I had written and gave no notes. On a couple of occasions, participants offered clarifications that I worked into the final text. However, as a result of this process I decided to anonymise one participant, despite them having a signed consent form. This was because this participant came out publicly as trans after our interview, in which we had discussed some sensitive issues to do with audience intimacy and stalkers (discussed in Chapter 6). I tried to contact her to make sure that she was happy with how I had represented her and offered to do a follow up interview, but as I received no response, I felt that I should not identify her and risk potential downstream harms through misrepresentation (franzke et al., 2020, p. 17).

3.5 Thematic analysis: The long and winding road to the final project

Following the characteristic design of ethnographic research, my analysis did not begin once fieldwork had ended, but rather the fieldwork itself was intimately intertwined with the practice of thematic analysis. Themes emerged out of the fieldwork and interview data and were adjusted and reformulated as the project progressed. Thus, data collection, organisation and analysis were dialectically linked, each informing the other aspects in an ongoing process of refinement as I moved through the project (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007). Thematic analysis is a well-established analytical method associated with ethnographic study (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2007) and was appropriate for this project's aim to understand patterns in the socially constructed experiences, perspectives and practices of content creators (Gibson and Hugh-Jones, 2012, p. 131). Additionally, it allowed the mapping of patterns across disparate types of online and offline ethnographic data (Willig, 2013, p. 61), and the analysis of large qualitative data sets (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 1).

3.5.1 Organising the data

All data was collected into the NVivo programme, the main strength of this software being its ability to store diverse data that could then be organised and coded together: fieldnotes, field photography, interview transcripts, and screenshots of videos, comments, social media

accounts, emails, interactions with creators, and journalistic sources. Knowing that this project would contain a huge amount of qualitative data of many different types, the importance of developing a robust organisational system was clear to me from the outset.

When I imported a new piece of data, I put the day's date in the title and then placed it in the appropriate "Data" folder (*Fig. 12*). I divided these into several categories and sub-categories based on different types of data, for example "VidCon USA", "YouTube Videos & Comments", and "Autoethnography". This meant that I could look through each category of data individually. I then code the data into the appropriate "Cases" folders (*Fig. 12*). My cases were divided into categories of "PEOPLE": industry professionals, journalists, researchers and YouTube employees (*Fig. 13*), and different "SPECIAL EVENTS": VidCon 2018, Creators for Change Summit, etc. I also created a folder called "ALL FIELDNOTES" that contained folders for every month of data collection, so that I could look through all my data by the month when it was collected (*Fig. 14*), which helped me to see patterns in change over time. Whilst having all these ways to categorise data may seem excessive, the benefits were twofold. Firstly, it allowed me to easily locate sources by data type, person, event, or date collected. And secondly, it allowed me to see patterns in the data in addition to those ascertained through thematic analysis.

Figure 12: Screenshots of "Data" and "Cases" folders in NVivo

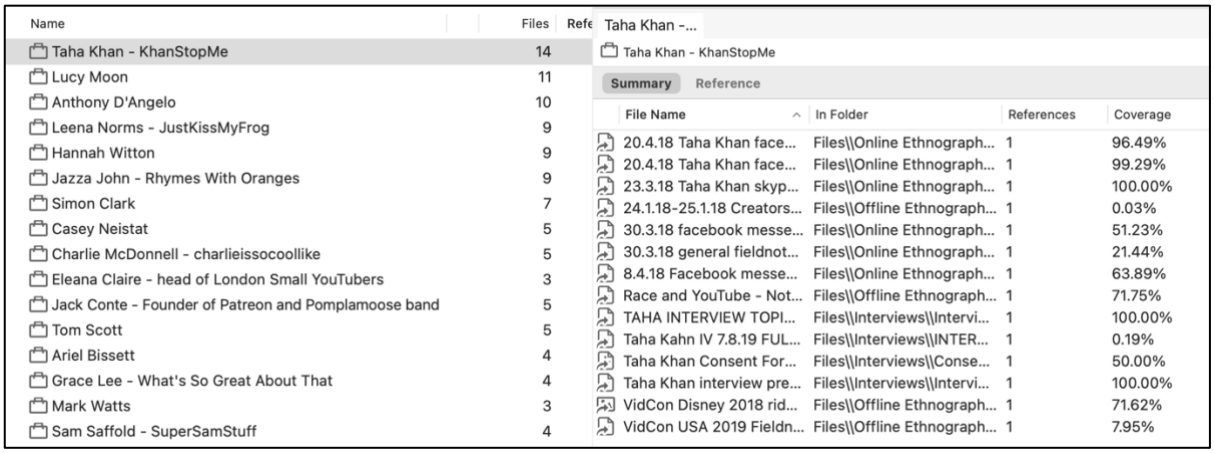

Figure 13: Screenshot of "Taha Khan" folder in "People - YouTubers" case

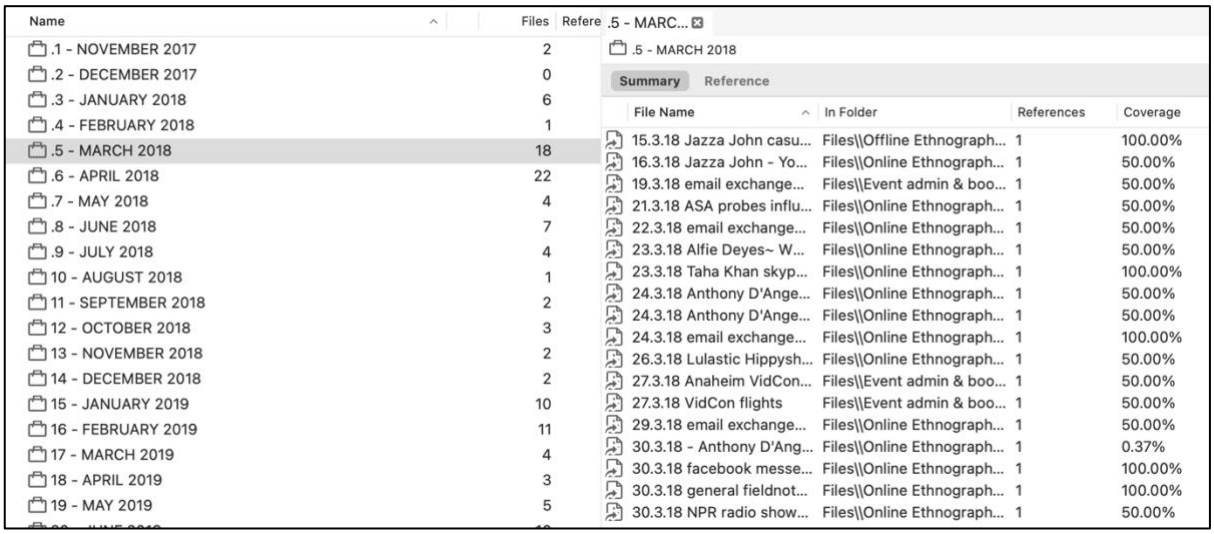

Figure 14: Screenshot of "March 2018" folder in "all fieldnotes" case

3.5.2 Analysing the data

Once I have placed the data in the appropriate “Data” and “Cases” folders, I proceed to coding. There was a certain amount of trial and error here: the central importance of the dialectic relationship between data collection and analysis quickly became apparent, and I found myself constantly tweaking the types of data being collected and themes into which I coded them.

Using the model developed by Attride-Stirling (2001), data was coded into *basic themes*, which are "most often a word or a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2009, p. 3). For my initial fieldnotes, Lofland's structure of activities was used as a loose guide to begin the analysis of data, searching systematically for instances of "actors", "activities", "settings", "ways of participating", "relationships", and "meanings" (Lofland, 1971; Lofland and Lofland, 1984). This facilitated the systematic analysis of data moving from the "microscopic examination of the constituents and details of human interaction to a more macroscopic perspective on how those constituents are aggregated into the behaviour and beliefs of larger groups" (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999, p. 78). However, as I progressed through the project and clearer themes began to emerge, I reactively began to code data in a more focussed manner to avoid the proliferation of excessive basic themes. While offline fieldwork was documented with full fieldnotes, I found that this wasn't practical, necessary or appropriate to do for online fieldwork every time I found an interesting video, tweet or article. For example, sometimes I just wanted to quickly write an analytic thought I had whilst watching a video. In these cases, rather than create a full new fieldnotes document, I would take a screenshot of the video and write my thought in the "description" box in NVivo. I would then code the screenshot for all cases and themes.

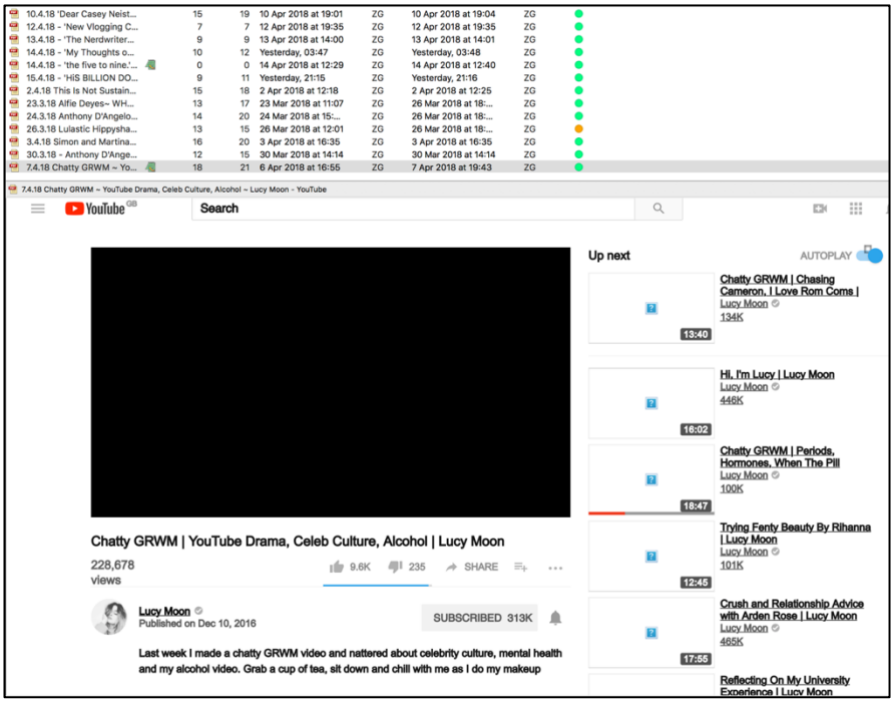

Figure 15: Screenshot of "YouTube Videos & Comments" folder, with Lucy Moon GRWM screenshot open

However, certain online observations required full fieldnotes. In these cases, I would write them in a memo and attach this to the relevant screenshot. I would then conduct thematic analysis on these memos. For example, *Fig. 16* below shows the fieldnotes memo and coding stripes attached to the video screenshot shown in *Fig. 15* above, "Chatty GRWM | YouTube Drama, Celeb Culture, Alcohol | Lucy Moon". I found this approach worked well in that it allowed me to be flexible in my collection and analysis of online data, whilst maintaining my robust organisational system.

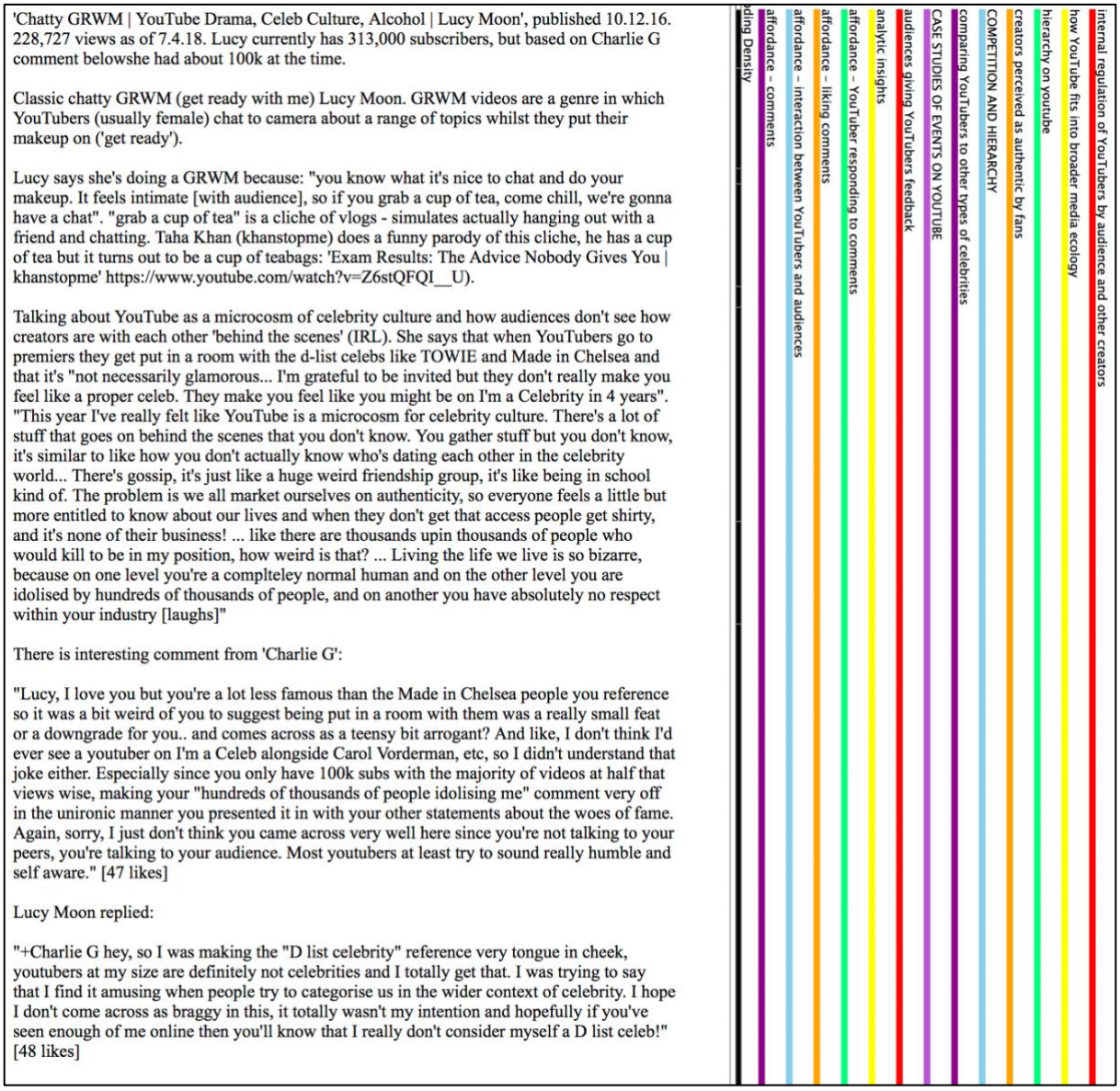

Figure 16: Screenshot of online fieldnotes from Lucy Moon GRWM vlog, with coding stripes

Basic themes were then categorised into organising themes, which are “more abstract and more revealing of what is going on in the texts” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389). Throughout data collection, whenever I coded a new piece of data, I would go through all basic themes and categorise them into organisational themes. I never left a basic theme floating around, always making sure to categorise it, even if it was the only theme in there for the time being. This was partly for practical reasons of not being overwhelmed by the proliferation of basic themes, but also to ensure that I was always engaging with my coding practices on an analytic level, critically taking note of what themes were emerging and using this to inform further data collection.

As the project progressed, organising themes were grouped into *global themes*, which “present an argument, or a position or an assertion about a given issue or reality” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389). Global themes constitute broader conceptual interpretations of the phenomena being studied and are developed through the recognition of patterns ascertained by “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 4). As DeWalt and DeWalt argue, “Once an insight surfaces, it should be treated like a hypothesis with a return to the data in order to build the clear and logical argument to support it” (2011, p. 180).

Fig. 17 below exemplifies the system of coding, showing the global theme of “SOCIOCULTURAL (CREATOR AND ONLINE VIDEO CULTURE)”, under which sits several organising themes including “WORKING IN MULTI-PLATFORM ENVIRONMENT”, which in turn contain basic themes including “competition between platforms to get creators” and “the rise and fall of platforms”**.**

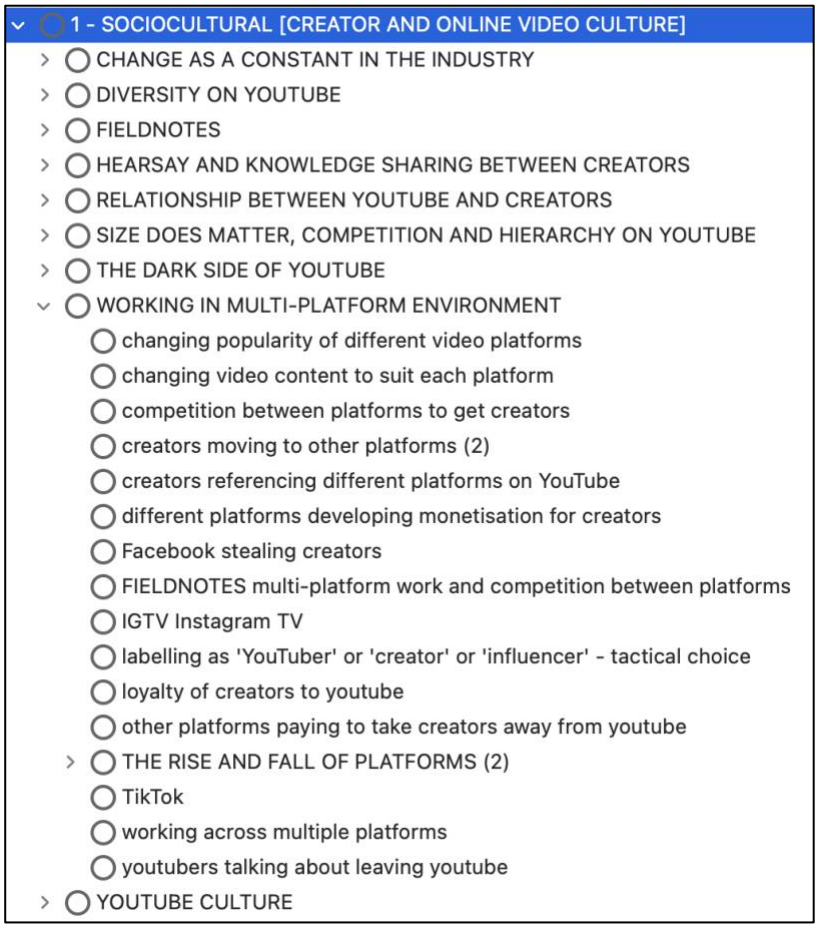

Figure 17: Screenshot showing example of coding system showing global, organising, and basic themes

Towards the latter stages of data collection, I started to slot some of the global themes into a tentative chapter structure, but even at that point there were a number of both global and organising themes that moved from the background to the foreground and back again as the analysis evolved and the thesis started to take shape. This is reflected in the final thematic coding framework, which contained many global themes that never made it into the final piece. At the same time, there are some organising themes that grew to become entire chapters, for example "FEEDING THE HUNGRY ALGORITHM (VISIBLITY)", sitting under the global theme "2 – TECHNOLOGICAL (THE METRIFICATION OF SELF-WORTH)", which developed into Chapter 5. I am sure that I am not alone as an ethnographer in saying that the moment where I had to lock the final empirical chapters into place was in many ways the most difficult part of the process, where so many fruitful avenues were closed, and I had to accept that a lot of the research would not see the light of day.

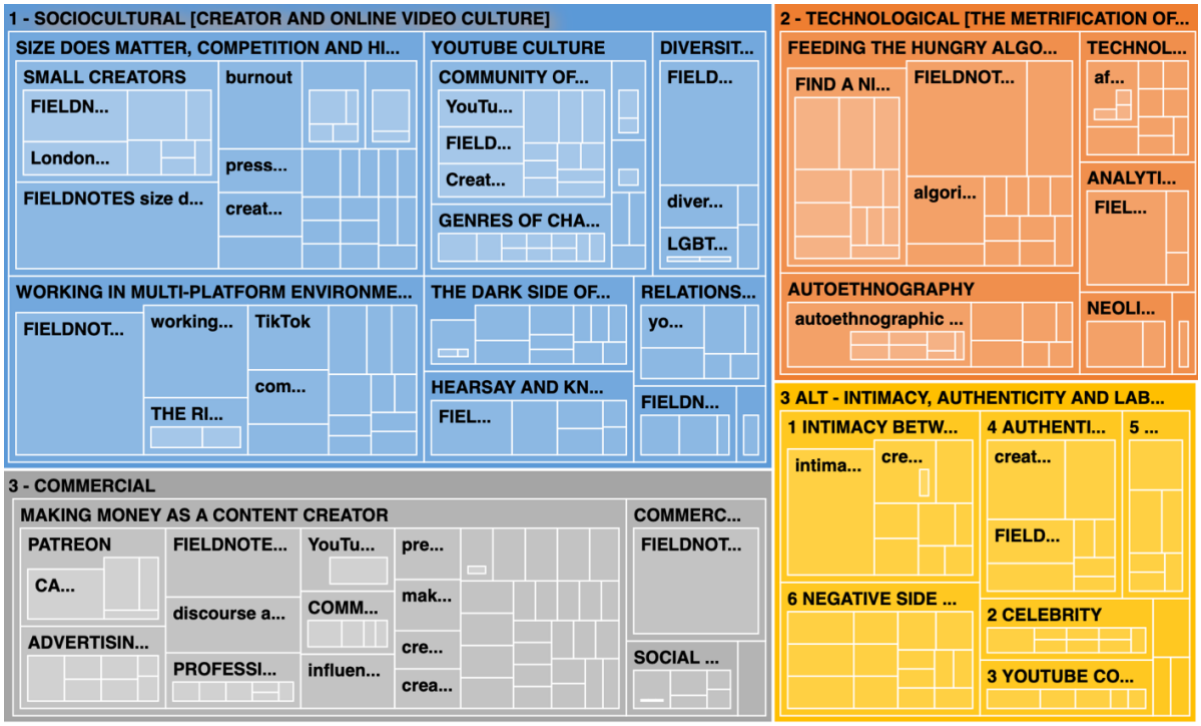

Figure 18: Screenshot of visualisation of main global, organising, and basic themes

By the end of data collection, a total of **514** basic themes, **43** organising themes, and **19** global themes[19] had emerged to make up the final thematic coding framework. *Fig 18* above shows a visualisation of the main analytical global themes, and the organisational and basic themes sitting within them. Whilst the image doesn't show the detail of all themes, it exemplifies the nested and processual nature of this data analysis, reminiscent of the rings of a tree that build over time.

3.6 Making sense of the micro and the macro: Combining experience-near and experience-distant findings

In closing this chapter, I want to take a moment to discuss how I approached attending to both micro experiential and macro structural dimensions of content creator labour, a fundamental aspect of this project, adopting Critical Media Industry Studies' emphasis on the relationship between strategies and tactics in the influencer industry (Havens et al., 2009; with reference to de Certeau, 1984). As Skeggs put it about her discovery of ethnography as

[19] Some of these global themes were spare categories that did not slot in elsewhere, such as 'PEOPLE', rather than conceptual findings. In reality, there were six analytical global themes.

a feminist method in the 1980's, "I wanted a method of analysis which would make the links between structure and practice, between the macro and the micro; a method which could link everyday interaction to history, economics, politics and wider cultural formations" (1994, p. 74). While I knew from the outset that I wanted this research to encompass how power operates on both micro and macro levels, and the interactions between the two, it took me some time to figure out how to achieve this methodologically.

In his seminal anthropological work, *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays* (1973/2000), Clifford Geertz's explains his approach of uniting what he calls "experience-near" and "experience-distant" observations during fieldwork. The idea here is to produce an interpretation of culture that is neither confined within the horizons of participants' own understandings of their culture (experience-near), nor neglecting the "distinctive tonalities of their existence" (p. 29) (experience-distant). Geertz compares the former to an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch, and the latter to an ethnography of witchcraft written by a geometer; neither is sufficient because one too close to the culture in question and one is too far removed from it. As he puts it, "confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon" (p. 29).

Throughout data collection, I moved across the spectrum between experience-near and experience-distant through the adoption of various data collection methods that deal with different scales of culture and experience. For example, the autoethnographic component was designed to get an insight into the micro experiential and embodied dimensions of content creation (experience-near), whereas fieldwork at major industry events allowed me to understand the broader structural dynamics of how power and knowledge operates at an industry level, benefitting some and disadvantaging others (experience-distant), and interviews sat somewhere between the two, inviting self-reflections from content creators about their own experiences as well as the broader sociocultural, commercial and technological contexts that they found themselves within. The challenge was to bring both frames into view simultaneously, coming close enough to understand the world from participants' perspectives, whilst at the same time stepping back far enough to make sense of it all as a social theorist. In doing so, I was able to gain a more complete understanding of

how power and resistance operates in the influencer industry, and how content creators seek to maintain some degree of agency within the broader structural constraints that they face.

CHAPTER 4

“We’re all told not to put our eggs in one basket”: Precarity, hierarchy and structural inequalities in the influencer industry

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In line with my research questions, in this first empirical chapter I explore some of the most noteworthy sociocultural, technological, and commercial factors that shape the work of social media content creators, with an attentiveness towards which creators are able to gain visibility and success, and conversely who is systematically excluded from opportunities. The analysis divided into three key findings. The first two sections deal with the broader conditions of precarity that shape the influencer industry: the necessity to diversify platforms and income streams, and the struggles that smaller creators in particular face in this deeply hierarchical industry where metric-determined visibility is key to success. In the third section I turn my attention to the complex and compounding structural inequalities that marginalised and less brandable creators face.

4.1 “We’re told not to put all our eggs in one basket”: Diversifying platforms and income streams

It was August 2018 when I met Simi Adeshina, a friendly but shy Nigerian-British 19-year-old from Greenwich, amongst the hustle and bustle of the green room at Summer in the City (SitC), the UK’s biggest online video conference. He seemed excited to be there, this was the first time he had been invited to SitC as a special guest and would be speaking on the animation and gaming panels. He told me that he had been posting videos on YouTube since he was 11, starting out with animations and more recently segueing into mostly gaming content. Having recently finished his A-Levels and with 220,000 subscribers, he had just reached the point of earning enough money from his YouTube channel to convince his mum and sister to let him defer his university places for a BA in Computer Science at Imperial and Warwick universities and pursue content creation full-time. Popularity online tends to snowball, and shortly Simi was propositioned by Facebook via his management company,

offering to pay him a fixed rate every time he livestreamed on their platform. Facebook had been struggling to change their image to become known as a destination for original video content, and so were actively headhunting popular creators from other platforms such as YouTube, Twitch and Instagram in an attempt to be competitive. Simi told me that he had been trying to decide at the time whether or not to start livestreaming on Twitch, a popular outlet for gamers. He explained to me that livestreaming—be it on Twitch, Facebook or YouTube—was appealing because it was far less time consuming than making edited videos, and also offered a higher level of interaction with audience members, whose questions and comments he could respond to in real time. Despite Facebook not being known as a destination for gaming content, their offer persuaded him to take his business there instead of Twitch as it provided him a level of income stability difficult to achieve through the usual platform revenue, which is dependent on viewing figures. When I met him, he had recently started livestreaming on Facebook for two hours every weekday, alongside posting edited videos on YouTube, and interacting with his audience regularly on Twitter and Instagram.

As this conversation with Simi captures, entrepreneurial content creators have complicated relationships with and decisions to make about the multi-platform environment, understanding themselves as cross-platform, multi-media brands, simultaneously dependent on and independent from the platforms that they work on. They are constantly trying to figure out what is the best use of their time in terms of what types of content to post on what platform, how best to interact with their audiences, and what types of paid work to engage in. In the run up to VidCon's first London event in February 2019, a message from General Manager Jim Louderback on their website read: "Uncovering the next big thing can propel your business forward, while spending too much time on a dying platform can slow your progress… The media world is changing rapidly; fortunes are being made and lost every month". This sort of alarmist-cum-opportunistic rhetoric abounds in the industry, leading to a relentless sense unease amongst content creators. They are constantly trying to figure out where best to spend their time and energy in an attempt to "keep up" (Gill and Pratt, 2008), creating what Scolere et al. have termed "platform-specific self-brands" (2018, p. 1), a form of self-branding "undertaken by individuals to garner attention, reputation, and potentially, profit" (Hearn, 2010, p. 427) that is based upon varied platform imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) and affordances.

I met 27-year-old Hannah Witton, who makes social media content about sex education and disability, for an interview in a café in North London. When I asked her the simple question "what platforms do you use for your work?" she told me:

> I use YouTube for my main videos, Instagram, Twitter, those are the main platforms. I used to have a Snapchat and Tumblr. Tumblr was the first to go because it wasn't making me any money. I loved it but I found that it wasn't a priority to keep up with it and one day I was just like why am I bothering? Basically, as soon as Instagram brought out Stories, I tried doing both and then I was like no never mind, goodbye Snapchat! I have my own website, which I occasionally write blogs on. I do have a Facebook page mainly so I could make my Instagram account a business account because you have to connect it to your page. My podcast also has a Twitter and Instagram. I started using Facebook recently to create a community for my book the Hormone Diaries. I wanted to have a place where other people could post stuff and actually a Facebook group was the best option for that. I have a private Discord community for Patrons. What else do I use? I have a newsletter on MailChimp. And I have Patreon, does that count as a platform? (Hannah Witton interview, June 2019)

As her comically lengthy but typical response exemplifies, the received wisdom in the influencer industry is that content creators are required to diversify their labour and income streams across many platforms and projects if they hope to build sustainable audiences and careers; in essence they are spread-betting their labour in order to mitigate risk in rapidly changing and unstable contexts. However, some creators took a riskier approach, such as one panellist on the "How to Break Out on TikTok" panel at VidCon UK 2019, who enthusiastically exclaimed:

> Obviously we're all told not to put all our eggs in one basket in terms of platform, but I'm putting all my eggs into TikTok this year. If it fails it will be no eggs for me, but if it does pay off, I'll be eating a huge omelette! (Fieldnotes from VidCon UK 2019)

Not putting all your eggs in one basket has become a pervasive metaphor in the industry, with creators advised to avoid becoming too heavily dependent on any one platform or revenue stream in case it dries up. At a fundamental level, there is a deep-seated anxiety in the creator community that a platform that appears to be a pillar of the social media ecology can disappear overnight, as was the case when the extremely popular Vine closed down in October 2016. Many creators had built their whole careers on Vine and struggled to relocate their audiences and adapt their content to new platforms, halting their livelihoods in their tracks. As a creator put it to me bluntly at a London Small YouTubers meeting in January 2019, "You have to be across all platforms because what if one closes down? That's your job". Incentivised by this platform uncertainty, many content creators have highly regimented cross-platform schedules for their content output. At a VidCon London 2019 panel, one TikTok star with 13 million+ followers said that she uploads to both Instagram and TikTok every day and to her YouTube channel once a week, always on the same day. These posts are supported by close scrutiny of her analytics, which she checks "10 times a day", altering her content according to her audience demographics and what is performing well that week. The following year at VidCon London 2020, I heard some creators talk about how they switch between different YouTube thumbnails every hour after a video goes live, checking the analytics to see which performs the best and settling on one accordingly. These examples highlight the immediacy of the analytic-audience feedback loop and its impacts on the process of platformised creative labour for cultural producers.

As a veteran content creator of over ten years (full-time since 2015), 809k subscribers across her two YouTube channels, 199k followers on Instagram and 227k followers on Twitter, 947 monthly Patreon supporters (or patrons), an assistant, editor, producer, manager and publisher, her own podcast *Doing It!,* two books under her belt and respect from her peers and other professionals[20], Hannah Witton is by all accounts an exemplar of success in the influencer industry. Nonetheless, like many of the creators I met during fieldwork, Hannah worried a great deal about her fluctuating success across platforms and the uncertain future stability of her income:

[20] As of March 2023.

> I know that my YouTube channel isn't doing as well as it used to. It's still growing but the growth isn't as much as it was in 2016/2017. So I'm like OK I need a plan B, not to completely stop doing YouTube, but some people just keep beating a dead horse and then they're like "Why isn't my channel doing so well?" and then they're like "Shit I've got no money, what am I going to do now?!" I don't want to be in that position. I want to be figuring it out. Maybe my channel does continue to grow and that's fine, but having all my eggs in one basket, I don't like that. It's precarious. (Hannah Witton interview, June 2019)

A similar sentiment was echoed in my interview with lifestyle and fashion creator Lucy Moon:

> I think that every YouTuber has a crisis every three months where they go "oh my god I don't know what I'm making, I don't know what I'm doing, my audience is *dying*, like it's all going wrong", and I've learnt that that is just part of this weird process that you're in when you're creating for an audience multiple times a week. (Lucy Moon interview, November 2018)

At the time of our interviews, the majority of Hannah and Lucy's income came from brand collaborations, as is the case for most professional content creators, with the remainder made up of a combination of AdSense revenue, affiliate links, Patreon, book and other product sales, and speaking gigs. Brands determine how much they will pay based on a creator's visibility metrics, which is Hannah and Lucy were so concerned about slumps in their YouTube channel growth. As Niebler and Kern put it, "the main precondition for a creator's success is their visibility on the platform – if creators are shown often on YouTube's recommendation sidebar, they can increase revenue chances, if they are shown less, they lose income" (2020, p. 3). This correlation between metric success and branded income was made crystal clear during a talk by the CEO of a major influencer marketing agency at VidCon London in February 2020, who said that influencers are incentivised to pay for fake likes and followers—an endemic problem in the industry—because "brands like ASOS will pay twice as much for branded posts by creators with twice as many followers".

In order to gain some respite from the stresses of algorithmically dependent income, Lucy had decided to build up alternative means of sharing her work through platforms "that don't depend on an algorithm, for example podcasting and blogging". But she found that as a result, she "spread herself too thin", neglecting that her main income came from where her audience was based, which was YouTube. As she put it to me, "it's a double-edged sword… I couldn't put 100% into YouTube because I was putting 50% into one thing and 25% into another". Four and a half years after our interview, right at the end of this project, she was still grappling with this dilemma. In a video titled "Let's Do A Mid-Week Reset Because My Life Needs A Spring Clean" (Lucy Moon, 2023), she talked about her ongoing struggles with balancing different platforms and projects:

> I've realised recently that I've got so many eggs in the basket of YouTube right now. Instagram for me is just this Wild West, TikTok is a Wild West, and I really just wanted somewhere that I could share my thoughts… and Substack seems like the perfect place. The more I'm exploring it, the more I'm like yes, this is for me… I wanted to be less reliant on YouTube. I adore YouTube but having seen what happened with Instagram and TikTok recently and how fast they've changed I am scared about having so many of my eggs in one basket. (Lucy Moon, 2023)

By "what happened with Instagram and TikTok", she is referring on the one hand to the controversial rise of short videos called Reels in 2021 as the most recommended form of content on Instagram over its historical commitments as a platform for photography—an attempt to compete with the popularity of TikTok (Tait, 2021)—and on the other to the ongoing rumblings in 2023 of a TikTok ban in the USA and UK (Dasgupta, 2023; Paul, 2023). Founded in 2017 and enjoying steady growth, Substack saw an explosion in popularity in 2020-2021, as cultural workers were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the precarity of working on social media platforms and in legacy Cultural and Creative Industries was thrown into stark relief. Substack is a newsletter subscription platform that offers the option for producers to put their work behind a paywall. Importantly, it is viewed by many as the antidote to overdependence on algorithmically dependent success. As an article in *Forbes* put it in 2021, "While some are sceptical about whether the shift from algorithm-powered news

feeds to age-old email newsletters will be long-lasting, others are optimistic that, in fact, what's old is a new age of media" (Fatemi, 2021).

Hannah also said she felt nervous about such a large proportion of her income being tied directly to something "as fickle as metric success" on a platform where creators can suddenly become "algorithmically challenged", as she put it, if their content stops being recommended to viewers. YouTube's infamous recommendation system, AKA "The Algorithm", is a prominent character in the lives of content creators that exerts various pressures on them in their struggles for visibility and income in the influencer industry, and the next chapter is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of their discourses, practices, and experiences with regards to it. Hannah tried to mitigate her dependency on algorithmically structured platforms by building up her community on the crowdfunding platform Patreon, because it "offers a form of income that isn't algorithm dependent, it is community dependent. Supporters can be more understanding if you want to upload less frequently or need to take a break". At face value, depending on a compassionate human community for income rather than an unforgiving algorithmic recommendation system seems to be an ideal solution, and one that many creators who are less easily brandable and able to merge with market logics embrace (Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021). However, the crowdfunding model comes with its own unique set of challenges, such as the increased pressure on creators to perform the "relational labour" (Baym, 2018) required to nurture an invested audience community, one that is willing to support them financially. In Chapter 6 I explore these challenges further and make the case that for marginalised creators, the tolls and challenges of cultivating audience-dependent income are high.

Back in 2002, writing about the acceleration in the nature and pace of work in the UK, McRobbie argued that those working in the cultural sector had to "find new ways of 'working' in the new cultural economy, which increasingly means holding down three or even four 'projects' at once" (p. 519). Doing three or four projects at once seems relatively modest when compared to the current average workload of a social media content creator, for whom a carefully curated combination of AdSense revenue, brand collaborations, affiliate links, merchandise and books sales, live shows, speaking appearances and crowdfunding,

supported by visibility and popularity across a wide range of unpredictable and unstable platforms, are all seen as part of a well-rounded career.

4.2 "YouTube doesn't care about small creators": (In)visibility, hierarchy, and the metrification of self-worth

According to a 2018 study of YouTube by Mathias Bärtl, 97% of all aspiring content creators on the platform did not make it above the US poverty line of around $12,000 a year, with only 3% making a living wage (Stokel-Walker, 2018a). Whilst some "microinfluencers" (those with 1000-100,000 followers) manage to defy the odds and earn a decent income—such as one tech reviewer creator I interviewed with only 10,000 YouTube subscribers who earnt £30,000 a year through a lucrative partnership with a gaming company—this is a metric-driven industry. A creator's number of views, likes and subscribers is a major factor in determining income, and they are on a constant treadmill to maintain, or better to increase, these figures if they hope to earn a sustainable living. Thus, content creators are engaged in a process of "self-knowledge through numbers" (Lupton, 2016, p. 3), involving acute self-scrutiny according to the barrage of audience analytics and popularity metrics available to them. There is ongoing debate in media and communications and related fields as to how researchers should understand this explosion of the granular data made available by platformisation, and what is means for producers, audiences, and other intermediaries. I approach the rise of the "quantified self" through the lens of neoliberalism, whereby "the very act of self-tracking, or positioning oneself as a self-tracker, is already a performance of a certain type of subject: the entrepreneurial, self-optimising subject" (Lupton, 2014). However, I agree with Baym et al., that interpretations of the power of digital platforms need to consider the agency, practices, and values of those who use them (2021., p. 3419), and so in this section, and the next chapter, I bring an ethnographic sensibility to understand how my participants made sense of the diverse ways in which they are metrified and hierarchised in the influencer industry.

In June 2018, eight months into fieldwork for this project, I took my first fieldwork trip to California for the annual VidCon US conference, the largest influencer convention in the world with 75,000 creator, fan, and industry attendees that year. It was at this event that it first became blindingly clear to me quite how far the industry has come from its amateur early

days, before the career aspiration of influencer even existed, and The Algorithm, AdSense and brand deals were unheard of. I noticed throughout the weekend that elite creators tended to close ranks in the company of new and unknown company, similar to the UK creator community but much more pronounced, reflecting the relative maturity and size of the US influencer industry. Whilst an awareness of clout is undoubtedly true in all cultural industries, it is especially tangible in the influencer industry, where popularity metrics are an integral and public aspect of creators' success. The pervasive discourse, at times veiled and at times explicit, is that popularity, fame and visibility were valued above other concerns. Or put another way, that these aims had become ends in themselves, to the point where "visibility is all there is" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 18). All of this made for an uncomfortable social situation at the convention. It felt as though there was an unyielding layer of quantified hierarchy enveloping the event, exacerbated by the division of physical space in terms of badge colour: from community, creator, and industry, through to featured creator and the highly coveted full access pass. An awareness of the subscriber and view counts of creators, and the influence of industry professionals, permeated every interaction. It was a thoroughly disheartening experience, fraught with the access issues that I reflected on in the methodology chapter, loneliness, and a general feeling of pessimism over the current state of YouTube as a platform that I had held close to my heart since 2009, when I first became immersed the world of its communities of hobbyist content creators.

However, some of my participants fully embraced the neoliberal self-improvement discourse, understanding the hard metrics that undergird success in the influencer industry as a meritocracy that rewards hard work and "talent". Others viewed it more cynically, as a rigged system fundamentally built on the wrong set of values (visibility, notoriety, fame), which unfairly rewarded certain types of people and expressions over others who were more deserving. Whichever side creators fell on, the majority reflected that their mood and sense of self-worth was heavily impacted by their metric success, as a fundamental determinant of their career opportunities and income. For example, Steve Simpson, who makes review videos about offbeat animations, told me during our interview:

> You'll see your videos are dwindling on YouTube Studio with big red numbers, and it's like "Viewership is down! Watch time is down! You're doing terrible! Got to get those

> numbers up!" I hate looking at YouTube because of it… Like here's the amount of views you had in the last 48 hours, here's the amount of views you had in the last hour or so. Even if you make a viral video, like one of my videos got a million views, and I was like great! But then every video after that was doing worse than the last one and YouTube Studio was like "Ooh your viewership is dropping". It really does make me depressed seeing numbers constantly. (Steve Simpson interview, August 2019)

As this quote reflects, even the experience of having a viral video, seen by many as the epitome of success for content creators, is a hollow victory marred by the subsequent dwindling of viewership. As participant Ahsante Bean commented on one of my autoethnographic vlogs (Zoe Glatt, 2018b), in which I described feeling down about the fact that hardly anyone was watching my YouTube videos: "That 'nobody's watching' feeling doesn't go away even when you gain more subs – your benchmark for how many views a video 'should' get only increases (and I've heard it from creators much larger than myself as well)." The quest for visibility is never fulfilled, the promise of having "made it" always deferred, with the only satisfactory option being a constant state of growth.

The extreme levels of hierarchy and division at industry events, marked by the flocking of industry and fan attention to the most famous and elite creators, left me with a lasting appreciation especially for the struggles of small and unknown creators currently trying to break into this intensely competitive industry, where "to be visible… is to be rendered valuable" (Duffy and Hund, 2019, p. 4996). In an industry organised by algorithmic visibility, every challenge that full-time professional content creators face is exponentially exacerbated in the lives of smaller creators. I learnt a great deal about these dynamics in attending Summer in the City (SitC), where I discovered how active and thriving the smaller creator community in London is and gained an understanding of how these creators fit into the bigger picture of the UK influencer industry. Summer in the City (SitC) started out as an informal community event in 2009, an opportunity for creators and viewers interested in YouTube culture to get together in London parks. Over the years it has grown to become the UK's biggest community-oriented online video conference, held annually at ExCel London with a capacity for 10,000 attendees since 2015. A yearly highlight of the conference for many attendees was the "Smaller Creators" panel, which is dedicated to showcasing and building

community amongst creators with a smaller following. The importance of the Smaller Creators panel was echoed to me by many creators at the event and at London Small YouTubers meetings. For example, Taha had attended every Smaller Creators panel since its inception in 2013, long before he became Panels Coordinator for SitC in 2016, and described how pivotal that first experience was:

> I think that panel, that room, that one hour of magic, I think of it so much for my belief in the community. That was the first time I felt like we could be part of a community… why I feel like I belong here. (Taha Khan interview, August 2019)

The Smaller Creators panel importantly functions as an opportunity for the community to voice opinions, experiences, and feelings about what it means to be a creator with a small following in an industry where visibility is a key factor for success. The panel at SitC 2019 was particularly memorable in this regard. I filed into the room along with a loud and jovial crowd, recognising many creators from previous fieldwork at London Small YouTubers meetings and other events. To begin, the moderator asked the panel a provocative question: "As a small creator who is being screwed over by YouTube, how can you get the company to listen to your concerns?" He was referring to the ongoing issues that small creators were facing with visibility and monetisation on the platform, and the lack of pathways to communicate grievances directly with YouTube. In February the previous year, YouTube had changed the eligibility requirements for creators to enter YouTube's Partner Programme and start monetising videos, so that "spammers, impersonators and other bad actors can't hurt the ecosystem or take advantage of good creators producing high-quality content" (YouTube, 2023a), in a bid to appease advertisers worried about being associated with unsavoury content (Welch, 2018). Where creators had previously only needed 10,000 views over the lifetime of their channel, they now needed to have 4000 hours of overall watch time within the past 12 months and a minimum of 1000 subscribers to join the YouTube Partner Programme. Small creators were furious about these changes, feeling that they demonstrated YouTube's disregard for them. One panellist at SitC 2019 responded contemptuously, "YouTube doesn't care about small creators", which was met with a knowing and appreciative cheer from the audience. He continued:

> They can't handle the amount of content being uploaded and so they've closed off the gates for small creators. No one small is getting recommended by The Algorithm. The only way to grow is to be pulled up by bigger creators. (Fieldnotes from Summer in the City 2019)

This opinion that YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system is heavily stacked towards promoting content from already-popular creators is supported by data, with channels at the top end of the platform growing at a disproportionate rate. In 2019, the number of YouTube channels with more than 1 million subscribers grew by 65% (to 16,000) and channels featuring between 10-100 thousand subscribers grew by 70% (to 950,000), whilst small channels with 100-1000 subscribers stayed the same, at a whopping 13 million (Funk, 2020). In other words, it became harder algorithmically to pass that crucial 1000 subscriber milestone needed for creators to join the YouTube Partner Program and start earning advertising revenue on their videos.

Figure 19: "Smaller Creators" panel at Summer in the City, August 2019

The slow and painful uphill battle for small creators means that most are excluded from monetising opportunities such as AdSense revenue, brand collaborations and crowdfunding for a protracted period, if indeed they ever make it to that point. I spoke to many smaller

creators in full-time employment who diligently spent all their evenings and weekends producing and promoting their social media content in the hopes that one day they would be able to quit their day jobs and make the transition to professional content creation. Some had been performing this "aspirational labour" (Duffy, 2017) for many years, waiting for their big break with little success, competing on platforms with full-time independent creators and production companies, who have teams of people working for them and the time and resources to pump out the much higher quantity and quality of content required for algorithmic visibility. This is a compounding factor as to why traditional inequalities across intersections of race, class and gender persist, and indeed why the barriers to entry remain "staggeringly high" in social media work (Duffy, 2017, p. 223). As Duffy found, as is the case in other tech and cultural industries, the social media producers most likely to rise to the top hail from the privilege: they tend to be white, educated, and possess family connections and financial support, a dynamic that I explore further in the next section.

Panellists and audience members at the Smaller Creators panel at SitC 2019 weren't only criticising YouTube and other platforms, but also the event organisers themselves, reflecting the general feelings in London's small creator community of being underappreciated and undervalued in the influencer industry. One panellist complained that there used to be a smaller creator on every panel, in recognition of the important role that they play in the UK creator community, but that this was no longer the case. Further, he and his co-panellists had not received full access passes that year due to the green room being "over capacity", a clear sign that more famous creators were receiving preferential treatment. The topic that perhaps generated the most anger and resentment in the smaller creator community was that the organisers of SitC 2019 has booked out The Fox pub for a private event, to which only select creators and industry professionals were invited. Since SitC had moved to the ExCel in 2015, The Fox had been the unofficial but well-established meeting place in the evenings for the community to get together for a drink after a day of panels. Many members of the community came just to The Fox in the evening rather than buying a ticket to the event, so that they could reconnect with friends without paying the (for some prohibitive) cost of a ticket.

When SitC first started, it was a small community event, where the distinction between creators and their fans was less pronounced. But as the influencer industry has grown to

become more formalised and commericalised, the categories of (celebrity) "creators" and their "fans" have become reified at the event, with industry intermediaries flocking to monetise this relationship. In this equation, small creators find themselves in an awkward position, identifying with neither category and increasingly unable to become successful professional creators in their own right. As participant Dorothy Chirwa (Doz) put it to me passionately on the first night of SitC 2019, "whenever the community has a good thing, it gets taken by the establishment, until nothing is left for the community". For Doz, The Fox being booked for a private party was the final nail in the coffin of SitC being taken over by "the man", and yet another example of how the industry doesn't have the interests of small creators at heart.

4.3 You don't have to be a straight, white guy to work here, but it helps: Structural inequalities in the influencer industry

Having explored the broader context of precarity that all creators face, in this section I turn my attention to structural inequalities in the influencer industry. Silicon Valley-imbued techno-utopian discourses pervaded every event that I attended, celebrating the diversity, inclusivity and meritocracy of the industry and a seemingly sincere belief in the world-changing potential of social media creators, a discourse that came through most clearly from platform representatives and other intermediaries such as social media marketers and talent agents. However, during fieldwork and interviews I found that contrary to such discourses, creators making stigmatized and less brandable content genres—and especially content creators from historically marginalised groups—face complex compounding sociocultural, technological, and commercial barriers to earning a living and achieving visibility in the influencer industry, mapping onto well-worn inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality and disability. There is a complex interplay between identity, politics, and commerciality in the industry, with new forms of structural inequality emerging due to the close alignment between the interests of advertisers and the governance of platforms, and the ways that this alignment unfolds in algorithmically structured environments. As Banet-Weiser and I argued in our work on feminist content creators, platforms' algorithms are "designed to render some content more visible than others, and the logic of this asymmetry is based on profitability", a

system that rewards “brand-safe” and depoliticized content and identities (Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 54; see also, Duffy and Meisner, 2022).

Many creators reflected to me that they made calculated decisions about what to include in videos based on worries about visibility and demonetisation[21]. They are required to make their content “advertiser-friendly” if they hope to be eligible to earn AdSense revenue on YouTube, invited to partake in brand collaborations, and to get promoted by “The Algorithm”. Hannah Witton explained to me that YouTube’s advertiser-friendly content guidelines operate on a tiered system: from full monetisation, through “not suitable for most advertisers (limited or no ads)”, to “not eligible for monetisation”. According to YouTube’s website, topics that are flagged as eligible for only limited or no AdSense revenue include “sexually suggestive content” such as discussions of masturbation, intercourse and advice on sexual performance; “controversial issues and sensitive events” such as war, political conflicts, terrorism and sexual abuse; content related to “harmful or dangerous acts” such as suicide, eating disorders, self-harm and domestic violence; and strong profanity “even if bleeped or for comedy, documentary, news or educational purposes” (YouTube Help, 2023). In this way, earning money on YouTube is linked to content creators presenting sanitised versions of themselves and of the world, chiming with Hesmondhalgh’s argument that “forms of communication that come to rely on advertising as their main source of income tend to become beholden to their advertisers” (2002/2019, p. 281).

The income that creators earn from AdSense revenue is also impacted by their CPM (*cost per mille*), or the amount that advertisers pay per 1,000 views on a video. YouTube runs an auction where advertisers bid for desirable audiences, and CPMs are calculated by video genre, geolocation and age of audience, and how “family friendly” the content is, amongst other demographic factors. Despite making highly educational, sex-positive, intersectional and gender-inclusive sex education content, which regularly addresses such issues as body positivity, feminism and disability, Hannah told me that her content was regularly demonetised and/or age restricted or flagged as “not suitable for most advertisers”. Further,

[21] Demonetisation is when YouTube removes pre- and mid-roll adverts from a video not deemed to meet their “community standards”, and thus the opportunity for the creator to earn a split of the advertising revenue for that video.

her CPMs were significantly lower than her male friends who made tech review and science education content, because of the "non-controversial" nature of their channels and the fact that their audience demographics were deemed by YouTube to be typically male, wealthy, and based in USA and Europe, and therefore highly appealing and valuable to advertisers. This tallies with industry data: according to the Racial and Gender Inequalities Influencer Report 2022, male influencers earned 30% more on average than female influencers in 2021, despite making up a smaller proportion of the industry (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022b). As Caplan and Gillespie note, the YouTube Partner Program is built on a system of "tiered governance… offering different users different sets of rules, different material resources and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized" (2020, p. 2). To try to mitigate the loss of income through low CPMs and limited access to AdSense revenue on her main sex education-oriented channel, Hannah had decided to create her second "More Hannah" channel, which focussed on "less controversial" topics such as lifestyle, fashion, arts and culture, career, and parenting. She showed me the difference in her AdSense revenue earnings between the two channels, which were astonishing. Despite her main channel having 727k subscribers and 429k video views that month, compared to her second channel, which had 82k subscribers and 183k views that month, she had earned a third more AdSense revenue on her second channel due to its higher CPM and the proportion of her videos that were monetizable.

A similar logic applies to which creators are invited to participate in brand collaborations in the influencer industry. Bishop (2021a) analysed how inequalities are perpetuated through influencer management tools, which are designed to support marketers in selecting influencers for advertising campaigns by evaluating "brand risk", finding that such algorithmic tools act to reify existing social inequalities across intersections of race, class and sexuality. Creators that represent marginal identities are often excluded from brand deals and other income generating opportunities. Jo Burford, who at the time of our interview was the Head of Creative Solutions at top-tier influencer marketing agency Whalar, told me that there is a great deal of diverse talent across social media platforms, but that there are systemic issues of exclusion from brands, marketing agencies and industry event organisers:

> Are [marginalised creators] being monetised? Are they the ones that get picked for panels? A lot of [middle managers in marketing agencies] want to play safe and want to get promoted… and I think that they have an unconscious bias towards safe campaigns. And when I say safe, I mean *pretty, blonde girl holding my product sitting on the beach*. They've seen it work before and they want to do it again. (Jo Burford interview, August 2019)

Brand collaborations are the primary and most lucrative revenue stream available to content creators and as the above quotation describes, there is a conservative culture at influencer marketing agencies driven by fear of the unknown, highly problematic for marginalised creators who are systematically excluded from such opportunities.

Even when marginalised creators are included in brand campaigns, they are often paid under the odds, if at all. Nicole Ocran, Co-Founder of *The Creator Union* in the UK, said in an interview for *The Guardian* that "LGBTQ+ creators, disabled creators, plus-size creators and Black and brown influencers are constantly being asked to work for free" (Tait, 2020). A study conducted by MSL and the Influencer League in 2021 found that there is a stark racial pay gap in USA influencer industry, as high as 35% between white and Black influencers, which, according to the agency, vastly overshadows the racial pay gaps in any other industry (MSL, 2021). A similar study conducted by MSL UK in 2022 found a 22% pay gap between Black and white influencers, and highlighted that when negotiating fees, white influencers are nearly three times more likely to generate a positive outcome than their Black counterparts (PR Week, 2022). Tinuke Bernard, advocate for Black creatives in the UK and founder of the Black Influencer Directory, said it was "clear to see that although different ethnicities, ages and abilities are being recognised, we are still not deemed equal or as valuable to the brand as our younger, whiter, more able-bodied counterparts" (Ibid.).

During fieldwork I found that the systemic exclusion of marginalised creators from commercial opportunities is exacerbated by sociocultural dynamics at industry events. During his time at the Panels Coordinator for Summer in the City (2016-2019), Taha Khan told me that despite feeling passionately about increasing the racial diversity of the event, he had found himself pushing up against an entrenched Whiteness in the creator community. During

the event, he heard many accounts from creators of colour who had experienced being side-lined by the (unpaid volunteer, majority white) stewards and having issues getting through to the backstage areas because they weren't recognised, whilst the white creators who stewards were fans of received preferential treatment. Further, the UK influencer scene was characterised by a tight-knit group of white creators that inadvertently made creators of colour feel alienated. As he explained later in our interview:

> There were a couple of non-white creators who would come to SitC and just feel very alienated and then just not come again, and also tell their social groups that SitC is not a place they want to go. Mainly because what was happening was that entire cohesive social groups from white communities were coming. So, you had all the white vloggy creators, and all the white gaming creators, and x, y, z, right? But then when it came to diversity, people were being plucked from very different social groups and so they didn't have any friends and it created a very bad dynamic in the green room. (Taha Khan interview, August 2019)

What this story exemplifies is that while industry events like SitC and VidCon invite a handful of creators of colour to speak on panels in order to appear to be diverse—in much the same way that brands have begun to include more diverse creators in their campaigns—this move is all surface and no substance without a concerted effort to change the industry on a more fundamental level. As Ng, White and Saha put it:

> The transformative potential of "diversity" efforts has been increasingly diluted through the cooptation of the term to simplistically refer to the presence of Black or brown individuals…with scant regard for complex intersections of nation, class, caste, and religion, or without genuine reflexivity or intent for structural change. (Ng, White and Saha, 2020, p. 146)

Taha said that these social barriers led to him to feel that facilitating a more meaningfully diverse UK creator community at SitC was "a lost cause", and so his mission changed to simply "getting any smallish up and coming Black or Brown creator on a panel because then at least they're on the website, and marketing people just look at the website". As with legacy Cultural

and Creative Industries, informal hiring practices are deeply entrenched in the influencer industry: it is more about who you know, not what you know. As Gill (2002) argues, this informality raises grave concerns for equal opportunities, exacerbated by the lack of transparency in the process. Even if Taha was not able to create significant sociocultural change, at least he could use his power to try to help marginalised creators gain access to coveted economic opportunities, "because you're giving them access to a lot of finance that no one else has".

It is within this broad context of complex interlocking inequalities that we need to understand the uneven labour that content creators are required to perform as they strive for stable careers and income in the influencer industry. Beyond sociocultural and commercial exclusions, marginalised creators are subjected to technological barriers in the form of *algorithmic discrimination*, which I explore in the next chapter. Excluded from income opportunities and facing platform-induced invisibility, marginalised creators and those making content less commensurate with neoliberal brand culture are under increased pressure to rely on audiences directly for financial support via crowdfunding, which opens them up to further harms, which I explore further in Chapter 6.

4.4 Unimaginable futures and the failures of meritocracy

Throughout my research I found that the working lives of the majority of content creators are fraught with anxiety, uncertainty and burnout. As one former full-time creator with three million+ subscribers put it succinctly at a VidCon London 2019, "I don't make online content full-time anymore because I didn't make enough money, it was too stressful, and it killed my creativity". This is a fast paced, unstable and constantly changing industry, which gives rise to a profound "inability of workers to imagine… their futures" (Gill, 2010, p. 253). The responsibility for managing precarity sits squarely on the shoulders of individual creators, who are unable to rely on any one platform, and are therefore tasked with keeping up with a frenetic pace of content output and spreading their labour across many platforms in order to mitigate the risk of failure.

Further, contrary to the highly celebratory myths about the *autonomy*, *freedom*, *openness* and *meritocracy* of social media creation that I introduced in Chapter 1, I found that in this advertising-driven industry we see the closing down rather than opening up of social mobility. It is presumed that "talent" will meritocratically shine through and rise to the top but, as Littler argues, "unrealised talent is… both the necessary and structural condition of its existence" (2013, p. 54). This is a competitive, linear, and hierarchical system, in which certain identities, expressions and types of content are propelled into the spotlight whilst others are cast into the shadows of obscurity, mapping onto well-worn inequalities of race, class, gender and sexuality (Bishop, 2018; 2019b; Duffy, 2017; Duguay, 2019; Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021; Sobande, 2017). In this chapter, I have explored the platform ecology as "a system that reflects, and a site that structures, power and values" (Noble and Tynes, 2016, p. 2), finding that creators who are the most profitable to platforms become the most visible, those who do not disrupt the neoliberal status quo: white, male, middle class, heteronormative, *brand-friendly*. Content creators who do not fit these narrow demographics face increased precarity, with multiple obstacles to success spanning across the sociocultural, technological and commercial realms of their work, supporting André Brock's claim that "the Western Internet, as a social structure, represents and maintains White, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual and Christian culture through its content" (2011, p. 1088).

Creative producers working in platformised environments are tasked with "managing the self in conditions of radical uncertainty" (Gill, 2010, p. 290) in new and complex ways, and face an escalation of conditions of precarity and inequality. Despite platforms' proclamations of care and compassion for the creators that generate profit for them, they show a lack of accountability and responsibility for their wellbeing; creators are merely *hosted* by platforms and therefore not granted any of the labour rights of employees. In closing this chapter, I share one particularly memorable and existential comment from a creator on the nature of building a career on fundamentally unstable platforms, and more broadly on the fleeting nature of celebrity:

> I am mentally and financially preparing for a day when there's a total YouTube apocalypse. Like when it goes, it's going to go, like that. And I'm going to wake up one morning, and it's going to be nothing. It's a life after YouTube plan, because I know

that the one day the stars are going to go out, and people go mad if they are famous and then lose it. I want to be prepared for that. There will come to time when I'm not recognised anymore. The more prepared I am for that financially, and emotionally, the better I'll be. I'll be fine. I've got to be. (Anonymised interviewee, August 2019)

CHAPTER 5

Omnipotent god, black box, oppressor? "The Algorithm" in platformised creative work

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YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system, known colloquially as "The Algorithm", is a powerful character in the lives of professional and aspiring social media content creators, exerting various pressures on them in their struggles for visibility and income in the influencer industry. Despite embarking on the project with no particular focus on the role of algorithms, it quickly became apparent how central this mechanism is in in the lives of content creators and platformised creative work more broadly. I argue that the introduction of algorithmic recommendation systems as a key mechanism marks an escalation of the conditions of precarity for platformised creative workers as compared to more traditional cultural industries. Every creator had tales of woe and theories to share about The Algorithm, and every industry event had panels and discussions dedicated to it: how it works, what content it is currently preferencing, who it is discriminating against, and, most importantly, how to navigate it in order to achieve success.

While the previous chapter aimed to map out the broad contours of labour for content creators working in the influencer industry, this chapter moves from the macro to the micro, to explore the multifaceted and situated ways that they understand and respond to The Algorithm in their working lives. Similarly to the previous chapter, I begin with the broader challenges that all creators face working on platforms structured by algorithmic recommendation systems, before turning in the final section to how such systems perpetuate and exacerbate structural inequalities, arguing that some creators are subject to *algorithmic discrimination*, which I define as a process whereby certain content, identities and positionalities within the platform economy are deprioritised from recommendation, in an industry where visibility is key to success (Glatt, 2022a). This chapter focusses on YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system, which provides a particularly interesting case study as

a platform where content creators' income is directly tied to algorithmic visibility due to the possibility of earning AdSense revenue, though I heard many sentiments about the challenges of algorithmic visibility on Instagram and TikTok throughout data collection. In addition to the broader focus of this thesis on creative labour and influencer industries, this chapter contributes to critical algorithm studies and to existing methods literature on the ethnographic research of algorithms (Bishop, 2019; Christin, 2020a; Hine, 2015; 2017; Seaver, 2017).

Whilst a multitude of structural factors combine to form an overall system of what Duffy et al. refer to as the "nested precarities" (2021) of social media work—including the factors explored in the previous chapter—algorithms demand scrutiny as a central mechanism with wide-ranging sociocultural and economic implications for content creators. As Nieborg and Poell found in their study of news and game production, "algorithmic logic becomes gradually more central to cultural production, as content developers are progressively orienting their production and circulation strategies toward the recommendation, ranking, and other kinds of end-user facing algorithms of major platforms" (2018, p. 6). Content creators' income and career prospects are in large part determined by how widely their content is recommended by a platform's algorithms, but platforms rarely share information as to how their algorithms work or what factors they are preferencing. Thus, as Bishop observes, even highly successful creators "are not safe from algorithmically induced platform invisibility" (2018, p. 71).

Researchers have highlighted that algorithms pose unique challenges for researchers due to their opacity as so-called "black boxed" technologies (Christin, 2020a), a characterisation that has in turn been explored, challenged and subverted by a number of qualitative researchers, who variously argue that rather than fetishize or obsess over the opacity of algorithms, understanding them as sociotechnical assemblages offers openings for creative methodological possibilities and more nuanced understandings of their impacts (Bishop, 2019; Seaver, 2017). Ethnography is particularly well suited as a methodology for examining how algorithms emerge through these sociotechnical assemblages in everyday life, able to encompass cultural practices, forms of sociality, and broader institutional factors, as well as discourses (Gray and Suri, 2019; Lange, 2019; Seaver, 2017). In his seminal piece on the ethnography of algorithmic systems, Seaver presents a vision of algorithms *as* rather than *in*

culture, whereby they are "not singular technical objects that enter into many different cultural interactions, but are rather unstable objects, culturally enacted by the practices people use to engage with them" (2017, p. 5). Inspired by these works, in this chapter I investigate not what YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system does or how it works in some objective sense, but the diverse cultural meanings and values that content creators attach to it, and how platforms, the influencer industry, and the nature of platformised creative work are constituted through these processes. Thus, in the following sections I explore The Algorithm through three distinct but parallel lenses: what content creators *say* about it (their imaginaries and cultural discourses), their *actions* with regards to it (their cultural practices), and how they *feel* about it (their experiences).

5.1 Content creator discourses: Algorithmic folk theories, Gods and detectives

YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system plays a central role in the working lives of content creators, as one of the key mechanisms controlling their metrics in an industry built upon visibility. Ethnographers have highlighted that the opaque nature of algorithms makes them inherently difficult to centre in research, but the influencer industry provides a rare case study wherein algorithms are the object of such intense scrutiny and discussion that the challenge instead becomes sifting through and understanding the myriad, divergent and strongly held beliefs and practices surrounding them. In this first section, I explore the prominent role of hearsay, folk theories and "industry lore" (Havens, 2014) in producing the various "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017) at work in constructing The Algorithm in the YouTube creator community.

The Algorithm was often painted by participants as an anthropomorphised mythical creature or vengeful God with the power to determine the destinies of creators. Stories of wild victories were attributed to it, such as animation reviewer Steve who had jumped from 1000 subscribers to over 70k in two short months after a video he made went viral. Working full-time in IT, Steve was grappling with what to do with his new-found but fragile success. Equally, I heard about instances of catastrophic failures blamed on the pernicious Algorithm, such as a major children's content creator who told me that her channel had gone from receiving 500k views a day to almost zero overnight as a result of changes to the recommendation of

kids' content in July 2019. Discussing a recent video that hadn't performed as well as anticipated, science creator Dr Simon Clark explained:

> The viability of what I make is largely determined by an algorithm that nobody understands… Talking about The Algorithm is like medieval Christians talking about God: make a sacrifice by putting a clickbaity thumbnail on it and we'll pray to The Algorithm. (Simon Clark interview, October 2018)

Despite his humour, he described his work and income being at the mercy of an unknown algorithmic system as making him feel "powerless". This quote highlights the uncertainty of work for content creators, who are subject to unknown, ever-changing algorithmic and seemingly arbitrary platform contexts. My participants commonly framed The Algorithm as an omnipotent, mysterious and unknowable being, further obfuscating the human agency and commercial interests at work on YouTube.

In their attempts to understand and respond to the caprices of The Algorithm, my participants had become algorithmic detectives. Havens conceptualisation of "industry lore" is useful here, which he defines as the "organisational common sense…which marks the boundaries of how industry insiders imagine television programming, its audiences, and the kinds of textual practices that can and cannot be profitable" (2014, p. 40). Drawing on the work of Foucault, Havens argues that industry lore functions as a form of power/knowledge through which organisational and economic priorities find their way into representational practices. In other words, he highlights the central role that cultural workers' *interpretations* of structural conditions play in the production of cultural texts. This concept is useful for thinking about the ways in which content creators are shaped by both structural and cultural forces in the production process. This is all the more complex in the multi-sided marketplace of social media platforms, where not only must content creators be cognisant of what will appeal to both audiences and advertisers, but also algorithmic recommendations systems, shaped by the interests of platform companies. As Gillespie notes, "the algorithm is the instrument of a business for which the information it delivers (or the advertisements it pairs with it) is the commodity" (2014, p. 183). In this equation, he explores the entanglements between

algorithms put into practice and the social tactics of users who take them up as a moving target, subject to constant change and flux.

Figure 20: Attending my first London Small YouTubers meeting, January 2019

I witnessed a prime example of such industry lore and algorithmic detective work in January 2019 at my first London Small YouTubers meeting (*Fig. 20*). The forty attendees were a diverse group and covered a broad spectrum of content genres—from music composers and film reviewers, to petfluencers and beauty vloggers—but they were all there for the same reason: to learn how to grow and monetise their YouTube channels. The majority of the meeting was dominated by a discussion about how small creators can gain visibility in the face of a hostile Algorithm. It is the received wisdom that until creators reach a minimum of 1000 subscribers (considered to be a nano-micro-atomic-insert-synonym-for-small-influencer), YouTube's algorithms refuse to push their content out to anyone at all. Confronted by this significant technological barrier to entry, the group were crowdsourcing all the information they could to sway it in their favour. For example, one creator said, "I've heard a rumour that it's at 60% of watch time retention that The Algorithm starts to pay attention and promote your content," and another shared that they'd heard that video tags were no longer as important as watch time, clicks, titles and thumbnails for driving traffic to content. These comments resulted in a lengthy discussion about the weighting of various metrics in determining

algorithmic recommendation. Bishop has described this as *algorithmic gossip*, defined as "communally and socially informed theories and strategies pertaining to recommender algorithms, shared and implemented to engender financial consistency and visibility on algorithmically structured social media platforms" (2019, p. 1). She argues convincingly that taking this kind of community-industry gossip seriously provides a valuable resource for understanding the sociocultural, political and economic dimensions of algorithms.

During my interview with Steve after the meeting, I asked if the intensity with which The Algorithm had been discussed was the norm. He explained that the meeting was a typical example of the obsessive hearsay and folk theories shared between content creators, putting it evocatively this way:

> No one quite knows what The Algorithm is, but everyone likes to theorise and speculate and it's basically, like if you can picture this visually, everyone would be in a room with tin foil hats on with conspiracy theories about "I saw that YouTube did this and that means that The Algorithm is working in that way" and they will try and connect all the dots. It's like a detective film where they have post it notes all over the board and they are connecting it with string and they think they've figured it out but then something else happens like 'uh-oh hats back on, now this is happening.' (Steve Simpson interview, August 2019)

Within this context of apprehensive peer-to-peer algorithmic detective work, an entire sub-industry of self-titled "algorithmic experts" or "growth hackers" has emerged in which individuals accrue social and economic capital by claiming privileged access to knowledge about how YouTube's algorithms work, as Bishop (2020) has explored in detail. Often successful and famous content creators in their own right, these are (overwhelmingly white and male) individuals who function as official and unofficial intermediaries between YouTube and content creators by selling theorisations of how to achieve algorithmic visibility on the platform (Bishop, 2020, p. 4). Responding to the uncertainties and anxieties that creators face, growth hackers present YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system as a black box to be opened, embracing the neoliberal logics of hard data over softer feminised forms of social media labour (Bishop, 2020; Duffy and Schwarz, 2018).

5.2 Content creator practices: Gaming The Algorithm

Algorithmic discourses inform creator practices (Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2017; 2018), but there is not a straightforward correlation between the two. In this section, I examine the common tactics that content creators employ in order to maximise visibility within unstable and unpredictable algorithmic contexts, and how such contexts can lead to broader shifts in the norms and genres of content creation. Whilst these tactics are commonplace, creators often find themselves in a Catch-22, as they simultaneously try to optimise their algorithmic visibility whilst avoiding the appearance of being overly invested in metric popularity, with its connotations of inauthenticity.

5.2.1 Beating the grind without losing your mind: Feeding the hungry algorithm

A simple shift in how YouTube recommends content can send shockwaves through the creator community, upending how they approach making videos and even what genre of videos they make. As Poell, Nieborg and Duffy argue, "because of its entrenched position, when YouTube exerts power by unilaterally deciding to reward and/or punish particular types of videos, it directly impacts thousands – if not hundreds of thousands – of cultural workers" (2021, p. 4). An example of such a shift was in 2012 when, in an attempt to combat clickbait[22] on the platform, YouTube shifted the primary metric for algorithmic recommendation from the number of clicks a video had to the amount of watch time (Alexander, 2019a). Where previously all content creators had to do to make a "successful" video (i.e. one that would be recommended widely to viewers) was to attract initial clicks and it didn't matter how long viewers stayed on it, suddenly creators had to pivot to make videos that would keep viewers watching for as long as possible. Whilst this move was somewhat effective in reducing the prevalence of clickbait, it also profoundly shifted the entire YouTube ecology. Where most videos used to sit well below the 10-minute mark, they have gradually gotten much longer across most major genres—including vlogs, tutorials, gaming livestreams, video essays and documentaries—to the point where half hour or longer videos are now a cultural norm. YouTube further incentivised this transformation by allowing mid-roll ads on videos over 10

[22] Clickbait is content with hyperbolic or misleading titles and thumbnails, designed explicitly with the aim of attracting clicks.

minutes, thus increasing the potential AdSense revenue that creators could earn on longer videos.

On the other side of the coin, genres that were unable to adapt to become longer were all but decimated, most notably animation, which had previously been a thriving segment of YouTube culture. I heard animator panellists at VidCon UK 2019 talk about how animations are far more labour intensive to make per minute of content as compared to most other genres, and how they struggled to keep up with the video length and output that creators in other genres could achieve. As Simi explained:

> I'd spend maybe a month working every day on a video and I'd be able to get, if I'm lucky, a 10-minute animation, but probably six minutes. But with let's say the video where I talked about why I stopped animating, I did that in a week, and it was 20 minutes long. So for me it was just like yeah, I should probably go in that direction then. (Simi Adeshina interview, October 2018)

The pressures to create longer videos, more quickly, had driven Simi away from animation and towards gaming commentary and livestreaming. As Duffy and Meisner found in their study of platform governance and algorithmic (in)visibility, "it was through impromptu experiments and comparisons that creators learned about ostensibly favored types of content and subjectivities; these ideas, in turn, structured the types of content they created or eschewed" (2022, p. 17). As one of my interviewees noted, these days it is rare to see animation channels recommended in the "trending" tab, a good indicator of what is popular on YouTube. On social media platforms, all different types of content vie for viewers' attention within the same space, and the way that their recommendation algorithms are calibrated plays a key role in determining which genres will thrive and which will die. As successful long-form video essayist Lindsay Ellis told *The Verge* in an interview, "I kind of lucked out that the algorithm eventually favored the type of content that I wanted to make" (Alexander, 2019b).

Within these constantly changing algorithmic contexts, creators employ sophisticated techniques in order to grow their visibility, such as strategically timing posts to coincide with

spikes in platform usage (Duffy, 2017, p. x), using eye-catching titles and thumbnails, producing exciting modifications of existing popular video trends/genres, finding a narrow content niche favored by The Algorithm, utilising effective metadata keywords for video SEO, promoting their content across platforms, focusing their energies on less competitive platforms, and filming "collabs" with other content creators in order to cross-pollinate audiences. Most importantly, it is common knowledge in the industry that The Algorithm preferences YouTube channels with regular uploads; posting at least one video a week is seen as the bare minimum requirement to gain any traction, and daily uploads are understood as the ideal for maximum visibility. All of this has led to inevitable burnout, as creators frantically compete with one another in both quantity and quality of content output. The pressures of The Algorithm have come to a head in the past couple of years, with burnout being one of the most discussed issues in the YouTube creator community and broader influencer industry (Stokel-Walker, 2018b). During my fieldwork I witnessed a proliferation of burnout related panels and talks at industry events, such as "Beating the Grind Without Losing Your Mind" (VidCon US 2019), in which creators talked about the never-ending churn of content production and the toll it was taking on their creativity and mental health. As Hannah Witton put it provocatively on a panel titled "How to stay productive without burning out" at VidCon London 2020, "it's a YouTube hamster wheel that you can't get off".

5.2.2 Stuck between a rock and a hard place: Algorithmic optimisation versus authenticity

There is a pervasive sense of injustice amongst many creators that YouTube's algorithms reward channels that churn out mediocre, bloated, clickbaity daily content over painstakingly crafted weekly or monthly videos, a structure that benefits large content farms and production houses over independent creators. For example, at VidCon UK 2019 I met a woman who worked in operations and business development at TheSoul Publishing, one of the behemoth content production companies of the platform economy. She shared some truly astonishing statistics with me: TheSoul Publishing employs 800 people, 150 across their two offices and the remainder as freelancers. At that time, the company owned 90 YouTube channels—across which they produced 3000 videos *a month*—including the wildly viral 5-Minute Crafts, which at that time was the third biggest channel on the platform with 50

million subscribers[23]. As their website puts it, "One of the world's most prolific and popular online media companies, TheSoul Publishing reaches more than a billion social media subscribers across the world's most popular platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snap, TikTok and YouTube" (TheSoul Publishing, 2023). 5-Minute Crafts is so ubiquitous that it has become an in joke in the creator community, with many parody and review videos pointing out how ridiculously bad their "life hacks" and crafts are (for example, JennaMarbles, 2019; Jarvis Johnson, 2018), and yet the bad quality of their content hasn't stopped them from becoming one of the most successful social media production companies in the world. At that time, TheSoul Publishing earnt all of their revenue through advertising revenue across YouTube and Facebook, which is why they had adopted what she called a "factory of content" business model. What this means on a basic level is that their content designed simply to maximise clicks and eyeballs. As they did not do any branded or sponsored content, they had little regard for content quality, just as long as they didn't violate any platform community guidelines, which would jeopardise their eligibility to earn advertising revenue. In other words, TheSoul Publishing is entirely based around a quantity over quality model of content production. This was very different to most of my participants, who ran independent and personality-driven channels that depended on brand deals and invested audiences for their income. Independent creators are unable to compete with companies like TheSoul Publishing in terms of quantity of output, so they must find other ways to maximise algorithmic visibility. Within this context, they must negotiate the extent to which they are willing to shape their content to fit with what the platform is preferencing, whilst simultaneously trying to avoid the negative cultural connotations surrounding practices of "gaming The Algorithm".

The ways in which my participants understood and navigated this issue varied greatly, as I found during interviews when I asked them to what extent they embraced tactics to optimise visibility. Some said that they never made content based solely on trends and metrics, whereas others were fairly matter of fact about it as a reality of the job. As one of my participants Jana Hisham put it on a panel at VidCon London 2020, as a content creator:

[23] 5-Minute Crafts has 79 million subscribers as of 8th March 2023.

> You need to be honest with yourself, if you only want to make the content that you're passionate about and find creatively fulfilling, then metrics shouldn't matter, but if you want to do it as a job then you have to be more strategic. (Fieldnotes from VidCon London 2020)

Whilst some who resisted algorithmic optimisation understood themselves as having more artistic integrity and authenticity—they were being *true to themselves* and didn't want to produce content only to gain views—others were clear that visibility was the main goal of their job, and they were willing to make any content that would lead to it. The majority of creators sat somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, trying to find an equilibrium between creating content they were proud of whilst maintaining financial stability. Several creators had some kind of self-imposed rule for balancing their output of popular versus other types of content; they "allowed" themselves a certain quota of videos that they knew would not perform well in terms of metrics, but that they really wanted to make for artistic, educational, or other reasons. Simi told me that he made "whatever he wanted" most of the time, but that every third video or so on his channel had to be a trending/popular one in order to keep his numbers up. His rationale for this was that, according to industry hearsay, channels that have big lulls or are too erratic in their viewing figures stop being recommended by The Algorithm. The last thing he wanted was for his channel to crash, so committing to "playing the game" for every third video seemed to him to be a reasonable compromise and acted as a kind of buoy for the channel.

It is well established in the literature on social media content creators that being perceived as "authentic" by viewers, whatever authenticity looks like for a particular creator-audience community, is fundamental for success in the influencer industry (for example, Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017). Every creator I interviewed struggled with balancing the pressures of producing content of sufficient quality and quantity to please YouTube's algorithms, whilst simultaneously performing the "relational labour" (Baym, 2018) required to maintain the core proposition of authenticity and intimacy with their audience. While it is common practise to modify content on the basis of algorithmic hearsay and folk theories, during fieldwork I found that creators who appeared to only chase metric (and financial) success were often perceived as lacking the all-important authenticity required of influencers and therefore could be met

with disapproval by audiences. It was not simply a matter of knowing how YouTube's recommendation system works, but also of successfully striking the right balance between utilising this knowledge and maintaining the right tone with audiences. Creators can quite easily find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place if their fail to achieve this balance, satisfying neither their audience nor The Algorithm.

5.3 Content creator experiences: The fear of algorithmically induced invisibility

As Bucher puts it, when trying to understand algorithms as sociological phenomena, "what people experience is not the mathematical recipe as such but, rather, the moods, affects and sensations that the algorithm helps to generate" (2017, p. 32). This section reflects on how it *feels* the work with (or against) YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system.

The overwhelming sentiments that content creators expressed about The Algorithm were anxiety, confusion, anger, and above all fear. For a full-time professional creator, the fear was that it will suddenly and inexplicably render them invisible to viewers and thus destroy their career. For a small aspiring creator, the fear was that they would never achieve the algorithmic visibility required for their career to take off. While content creators have never been on solid ground when it comes to YouTube's algorithms, their fears escalated during moments of algorithmic "rupture" on the platform (Duffy et al., 2021, p. 8), a significant incident of which was the first Adpocalypse in 2017. In response to reports of advertisments appearing on terrorist content, as well as an anti-Semitic video posted by Felix Kjellberg (AKA PewDiePie), a number of high-profile advertisers pulled out of YouTube. In an attempt to appease advertisers, YouTube drastically tightened how it algorithmically identifies "advertiser-friendly" content, leading to a tidal wave of videos being demonetised and deselected for recommendation to viewers. Creators felt disempowered and angry that The Algorithm was making their already precarious livelihoods even more unpredictable, and heavily criticised YouTube for prioritising the interests of advertisers over the creators who provide the labour that generates value for them. As A-list creator Lilly Singh (AKA Superwoman) put it in a vlog:

> Over the past year it has all gone to hell. There's just no pattern to what is happening in essentially my business, and it is scary and it's frustrating. I don't know *if* people see my videos, I don't know *how* people see my videos, I don't know *what* channels are being promoted, I don't know *why* some channels are being promoted more than others. There's just no answers, and that's scary to me. (Lilly Singh, 2017)

There have been multiple Adpocalypses since 2017, as YouTube has tried to keep a lid on a succession of controversies, from the improper recommendation of content to kids, to paedophilia concerns, to hate speech (Alexander, 2019). Consequently, YouTube has struggled to balance fostering its amateur participatory culture and the interests of advertisers (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020, p. 9), and in recent years the platform has gradually moved away from promoting its home-grown talent in favour of Hollywood celebrities, music videos and clips from late-night shows—a safer bet for attracting advertising dollars—leaving its community of content creators feeling abandoned (Alexander, 2019). As discussed in the previous chapter, small and aspiring creators have been disproportionately punished by these changes, generating a pervasive feeling in the London Small YouTubers community that the drawbridge has been pulled up and the algorithmic barriers to entry are insurmountable.

5.4 Omnipotent God, black box, mystery, machine, oppressor: Algorithmic discrimination in platformised creative work

So far in this chapter I have discussed the heightened precarity and pressures that *all* content creators experience in the face of algorithmic recommendation systems as platformised creative workers. However, throughout data collection I heard repeatedly about systemic issues in the influencer industry of what I call "algorithmic discrimination", which I define as a process whereby certain content, identities and positionalities within the platform economy are deprioritised from recommendation, in an industry where visibility is key to success (Glatt, 2022).

There is growing acknowledgement amongst creators, platforms, and researchers that algorithmic punishment is not evenly distributed, disproportionately impacting certain groups in line with existing social inequalities. For example, 60% of the respondents for the Racial

and Gender Inequalities Influencer Report 2022 either fully or somewhat agreed with the statement “do you believe social media platforms ask moderators to suppress content by certain nationalities, political views, disabilities, or users from lower socioeconomic classes?” (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022b). In this regard, Safiya Noble’s influential book *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism* (2018) provides essential insights into the interlocking nature of socio-technical systems of oppression and commercial interests in the context of Google’s search engine. She argues that contrary to the popular idea that Google is a neutral vessel that offers an equal playing field for all ideas and identities, in reality it is a commercial search engine that profits from hypersexualised, discriminatory, and racist misrepresentations of Black women and girls. As she puts it powerfully, “Algorithmic oppression is not just a glitch in the system but, rather, is fundamental to the operating system of the web” (Noble, 2018, p. 10). Building on Noble’s work, feminist influencer scholars have explored how historically marginalised groups and non-normative expressions are punished by algorithmic systems in the creator economy (Are, 2022; Are and Briggs, 2023; Banet-Weiser and Glatt, 2022; Bishop, 2018a; Duffy et al., 2021; Duffy and Meisner, 2022; Glatt, 2022). For example, Are explored the “shadowbanning” of pole dancers on Instagram, a process of “light and secret censorship” whereby platforms hide and make unsearchable social media content rather than deleting it outright (2022, p. 1). She argues that Instagram’s algorithmic policing of women’s nudity and sexuality is a feminist issue: pole dancing can both a form of expression and a source of income, and yet it is viewed as “risky, borderline and worth hiding in a way that… men’s bodies and actions aren’t” (Are, 2022, p. 15).

Content creators routinely report that their content is not recommended widely or is censored on grounds of race. For example, in August 2020 a nude but modest photo of plus-size Black model Nyome Nicholas-Williams was removed repeatedly from Instagram, prompting the widespread circulation of the hashtag #IwanttoseeNyome. The photographer Alexandra Cameron accused Instagram over the disconnection between their positive statements about Black Lives Matter and the unfair targeting of its Black content creators, this event occurring only two months after Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri announced that the company was “committed to looking at the ways our policies, tools, and processes impact Black people and other underrepresented groups on Instagram”, citing “algorithmic bias” as a key issue (Iqbal, 2020). More recently, in 2021 TikTok released a public apology after a video

from comedian Ziggi Tyler went viral accusing the platform of reifying racial bias in its algorithmic recommendation system. He found that phrases such as “Black Lives Matter” and “black people” were blocked from its Creator Marketplace, while “white supremacy” and “I am a neo Nazi” were not (Columbo, 2021). In a video essay about algorithms and skin tone bias, creator Khadija Mbowe discusses the colourism that she experiences as a darker-skinned Black creator on YouTube, where audiences’ implicit bias towards lighter-skinned creators in turn becomes algorithmic bias that determines who is seen and not seen on the platform. As she says in the video, “These algorithms are simply just doing their job. If you mostly watch content by creators and influencers who are on the beige spectrum…that’s all it’s going to keep feeding you” (Khadijah Mbowe, 2021).

More broadly, Duffy and Meisner (2022) explored how creators’ understandings of platform (in)visibility and wider systems of regulation and governance structured their experiences, creative processes, and content. The creators they interviewed, sampled from historically marginalised identities and/or stigmatized content genres, shared an understanding that platforms allocate visibility in ways that are uneven, biased, and inconsistent, describing being unfairly targeted “by both formal and informal punishments – from account suspensions and content violations to shadowbans” (Duffy and Meisner, 2022, p. 16). Importantly, these feelings were matched by collective perceptions that “mainstream voices and content genres deemed normative seemed to evade the punitive apparatuses that others are socialized to fear” (Ibid.), a sentiment that was echoed in my own fieldwork and interviews. For example, the 2017 Adpocalypse was especially problematic for LGBTQ+ creators, despite YouTube having long positioned itself as a champion for the community (Hunt, 2017; Khaled, 2019; Levin, 2018). At a panel titled “Not Suitable for Advertisers” during my fieldwork at VidCon US 2018, I witnessed an impassioned discussion about the pain and frustration that LGBTQ+ creators were experiencing with their content being demonetised and age restricted, with no recourse to air their grievances with YouTube beyond tagging them on Twitter. Creator at the session agreed that YouTube only cared about keeping its advertisers and star creators happy, framing the conversation in relation to the debacle around Logan Paul’s infamous suicide forest video, which had occurred just a few months prior, in which Paul filmed the body of a man who has recently committed suicide in Aokigahara, Japan. The video was live on YouTube for 24 hours, during which time it was viewed 6.3 million times and was featured on the site’s

coveted top-trending page, before being taken down by Paul himself due to the severe criticism it received from the public (Alba, 2018). Creators on the panel posited that YouTube did not take the video down first in response to the multiple complaints it received due to Logan Paul being one of the platform's top creators, with over 15 million subscribers and three billion video views at the time. He was both part of the "Google Preferred" programme, which makes elite creators immune to algorithmic demonetisation and given a higher rate of advertising revenue, and also the star of two YouTube Red Original series, meaning that YouTube had a financial incentive to keep him happy on the platform (Ibid.). At the same time, creators on the "Not Suitable for Advertisers" panel at VidCon had resorted to removing any reference LGBTQ+ issues in the tags and titles of their videos, in a bid to avoid algorithmic invisibility, but this had the adverse effect of making their videos unsearchable. One of the panellists said that she had decided to leave YouTube altogether, feeling that the platform no longer had her interests at heart, if indeed it ever had. This example highlights the impersonal and anonymous nature of working on social media platforms, where all but the most elite creators are left to fend for themselves with partial information about how their content is recommended or demonetised and little opportunity to communicate directly with the platforms that host their work. As discussed here and in the previous chapter, creators from historically marginalised identities face greater obstacles in the pursuit of sustainable careers in this industry as a result of compounding sociocultural, technological and commercial inequalities. This bias is baked into the very design of platform algorithms, supporting arguments made by intersectional technology scholars that highlight enduring and emerging forms of intersectional discrimination on the internet (Brock, 2011; 2020; Noble and Tynes, 2016; Noble, 2018). While The Algorithm isn't understood as a friendly force in the wider influencer community-industry, for marginalised creators it is experienced as nothing short of hostile.

In this chapter, I analysed "The Algorithm" as a multifaceted sociotechnical assemblage that emerged through content creators' discourses, practices and experiences as they tried to make sense of it in their working lives. The Algorithm was variously understood as an omnipotent God, a black box to be opened, a mystery to be solved, a voracious machine, and an oppressor of marginalised groups. Above all, it was experienced as unknowable, impenetrable, mysterious, and inscrutable. Despite the diversity of my participants, I found

that they universally understood The Algorithm as an antagonistic force, one which made their working lives more precarious, unpredictable and stressful. In the influencer industry, where "[visibility] is a key vector of instability" (Duffy et al., 2021, p. 10), creators are obligated to bend themselves to the wills and shifts of the "algorithmic boss" (Duffy, 2020, p. 103) if they hope to build and sustain careers. Some may wonder if ethnography is a useful method for investigating platforms' algorithmic recommendation systems, unable to get to the heart of how they "actually work", but I argue that attending to the lived experiences of content creators who navigate algorithms on a daily basis adds a powerful and complimentary dimension to more macro structural critiques of the asymmetries of power built into capitalist algorithmic systems (for example, Noble 2018; Pasquale 2015). Platform companies "hold a perverse level of power in contemporary culture and society" (Duffy et al. 2021, p. 9) and rendering particular identities invisible or less visible as a result of pressures from advertisers raises serious questions about their role as curators of public discourse (Gillespie, 2010).

CHAPTER 6

The intimacy triple bind: Structural inequalities and relational labour in the influencer industry

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As established in the Chapter 1, there is a perception that pathways to success in the influencer industry are far more open and egalitarian than legacy Cultural and Creative Industries. Not confronted with the usual gatekeepers determining their suitability for opportunities and setting the disciplinary boundaries of their labour—line managers, commissioning editors, executive producers, directors—the careers of content creators in the influencer industry instead live or die by their ability to directly cultivate and maintain an invested "audience community" (Baym, 2000). To this end, as many scholars have noted, they are encouraged to commodify their personalities, lives and tastes, building "authentic" self-brands, appealing on-screen personas, and intimacy with audiences (for example, Abidin, 2015; Baym, 2018; Bishop, 2018a; Cocker and Cronin, 2017; Cunningham and Craig, 2017; Duffy, 2016; 2017; Duguay, 2019; Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021; Marwick, 2013; 2015; Raun, 2018).

This phenomenon has been framed theoretically in various ways. Many researchers of creative labour have drawn on Arlie Hochschild's concept of "emotional labour" developed in her influential book *The Managed Heart*, to describe activity whereby "impersonal relations are to be seen *as if* they were personal [and] relations based on getting and giving money are to be seen *as if* they were relations free of money" (Hochschild, 1983/2002, p. 106; for example, Baym, 2018; Bishop, 2018b; Casey and Littler, 2022; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Grindstaff, 2002; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). Importantly, this requires workers to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 1983/2002, p. 7). In her book *Playing to the crowd: Musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection* (2018), Nancy Baym develops the useful concept of "relational labour" to describe this phenomenon in the context of musicians and

their fans, defined as the "ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work" (p. 19). As she argues, any analysis of relational labour must be also understood in terms of the "relational boundaries" that creators put in place, as they attempt to strike a balance between closeness and distance, and between work and life (Baym, 2018).

Baym notes that "the internet is full of people ready to insult anyone for laughs. And if you're a woman, let alone a woman of color, they're going to go low" (2018: 169) but her book does not provide a systematic analysis of such inequalities. While it is well documented in influencer research that content creators are required to practise emotional and relational labour, there is a lack of attention paid to the unequal distribution of the tolls that managing these audience relationships can take. Within the broader context of the structural inequalities that mark labour in the influencer industry explored in the previous chapters, this chapter seeks builds a dialogue between two seemingly disparate bodies of work: influencers' relational labour, on the one hand, and the proliferation of what has variously been termed "toxic technocultures" (Massanari, 2017), "misogynoir" (Bailey, 2010), and "networked misogyny" (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016), on the other. Thus, this chapter dialogues with recent scholarship that strives to understand the relationship between the requisite career visibility and the resultant public scrutiny, hate and harassment that is par for the course for influencers, "all of which are exacerbated for women, communities of color, and the LGBTQIA community" (Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt, 2022, p. 1661; see also, Duffy and Hund, 2019). I suggest that the imperative of relational labour and the flourishing of hate and harassment towards marginalised groups can—and indeed should—be thought together productively in the context of the influencer industry, as both concern the ways in which affect, pleasurable and painful, circulates between content creators and their audiences. The analysis is divided into five key practices that creators employ in their attempts to manage relational boundaries with both friendly and hostile audiences: (1) leaning into *making* rather than *being* content; (2) (dis)engagement with anti-fans through silence; (3) retreating into private community spaces, away from the exposure of public platforms; (4) turning off public comments; and (5) disavowing audience intimacy altogether.

I conclude this final empirical chapter by considering how these dynamics interplay with the exclusions discussed in the previous chapters, arguing that the relational tactics available to creators, and their effectiveness, need to be understood in terms of structural inequalities. In the previous chapters I argued that creators from historically marginalised groups and stigmatized and less brandable content verticals face complex systemic technological, sociocultural and commercial exclusions. Here I build on those findings to argue that these creators are stuck in what I call an "intimacy triple bind": already at higher risk of trolling and harassment, yet under increased pressure to perform relational labour, which adversely opens them up to further harms.

6.1 The public game of life: Intimacy and labour in the influencer industry

While the influencer industry is a highly lucrative and established player in the global media marketplace, its content, cultural norms, and genres continue to be strongly shaped by its beginnings in amateur production, including the expected intimacy between video producers and consumers. Recognising YouTube's cultural roots, Raun argues that "intimacy as genre presupposes [its] history… as an amateur-driven platform", with audiences expecting "intimacy in content as well as style" through access to creators' everyday lives and private domestic spaces (2018, p. 105). Several scholars have identified the intimacy that social media content creators cultivate with their audiences as key to their appeal as compared to Hollywood and other mainstream celebrities. In her seminal work on microcelebrities, Senft argued that their popularity depended on connection to audiences rather than separation from them (Senft, 2008, p. 26). Where mainstream Hollywood celebrities purposefully cultivated "distance, a temporality of scarcity, and performances of the extraordinary" (Jerslev, 2016, p. 5238), Marwick describes the ways in which influencers utilise "strategic intimacy", by presenting "personas that appear to be less controlled than those of highly regulated, highly consumer brand oriented film and television stars" (2015, p. 346). As she puts it, "while mainstream celebrities are expected to protect their privacy, micro-celebrities cannot or they'll lose this attention" (2013, p. 143). Abidin and Thompson, writing about blogshop owners in Singapore, argued that their co-creation of economic value rests on what they called "persona intimacy", or "senses of homo-social intimacy between the persona of models and their audience of readers-cum-consumers" (2012, p. 467). In her research on

queer women's self-representation on Instagram and Vine, Duguay found that they performed "intimate affective labour" to tap into their audiences' assumed desire to see people like them expressing their sexuality within everyday contexts, an assumption that she found was confirmed through the high audience engagement with intimate content (2019, p. 6). As Jerslev puts it, for content creators, work is characterised by "continuous and multiple uploads of performances of a private self; it is about access, immediacy, and instantaneity" (2016, p. 5238). We can understand this cultural phenomenon as an iteration of what Tyler and Gill term the "intimate gaze", which "has come to constitute a kind of grammar of mediation, such that all mediated life becomes refracted through a lens of intimacy, in a way that is distinct from earlier moments", linked to the confessional and personalising tendencies of the media (2013, p. 80).

Whilst there are myriad personal and social reasons why content creators build intimate relationships with their audiences, there is no doubt that one motivation is economic: on social media, intimacy sells. As Berryman and Kavka put it, writing about the popularity of anxiety vlogs on YouTube, there is a "booming economy of affective labour, where the exchange of tears for sympathetic ears is in consistently high demand" (Berryman and Kavka, 2018, p. 85). In line with this interpretation, Bishop argues that the anxiety disorder confessional vlog genre on YouTube can be understood as a tactic for increasing algorithmic visibility on a platform that rewards authenticity and eschews excessive commerciality (2018b, p. 96). As I heard numerous times throughout my fieldwork, on social media platforms the audience *comes for the content, stays for the personality*.

As Duffy highlights, in writing about feminised bloggers, "aspirants recognize the instrumental value of their affective relations as they try to increase their followers and likes; improve rankings; and rethink approaches to content based upon feedback provided by their readers" (2016, p. 449). After all, the influencer industry is built on an ecosystem of advertisers, social media marketers, and algorithmic systems, all of which are structured by the "quantification imperative… wherein bigger typically translates into better" (Duffy, 2016, p. 449). I witnessed a prime example of the cold, hard commercial value of intimacy and authenticity during a talk by the CEO of a large influencer marketing agency at VidCon London in February 2020, to an audience of influencers, talent agents and fellow marketers. He talked about a major brand

campaign he had worked on, in which he changed their strategy away from shiny billboard-style Instagram content towards the influencer brand ambassadors making video content because it's "more real and relatable". He said that it was vital that these influencers were also allowed to critique the brand because, ironically, it ultimately "increases authenticity and trust" in the brand.

The mobilisation of intimacy in creative work is not a new phenomenon. As Gill and Pratt summarise, several terms have been developed that speak to the relationship between broader transformations in advanced capitalism and the subjectivities of creative workers, including "creative labour, network labour, cognitive labour, affective labour and immaterial labour" (2008, p. 3). This research concerns two main strands: (1) Foucauldian-inspired analyses of the "internalization" (Brophy and de Peuter, 2007) of the psycho-social dynamics of cultural work, such as "pleasure, self-expression, self-enterprise and self-actualisation" (Ursell, 2006, p. 161), as well as how "how pleasure itself may become a disciplinary technology" in creative work (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p. 21; see also Duffy, 2017; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008; McRobbie, 2016; Ross, 2003), and (2) the ways in which cultural workers "are required to deal with the particular emotions generated in the course of their jobs, both their own and those of others", shaped by the specific structural conditions of the Cultural and Creative Industries (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008, p. 103). It is the latter that I am dealing with in this chapter, with the former describing the context in which content creators are situated.

While the broader literature on creative labour explored above is foundational, a framework is needed that addresses the explicitly audience facing nature of social media content creator labour. In this sense, they are more akin to the celebrity status of actors and musicians than to the creatives working behind cameras and screens in legacy Cultural and Creative Industry roles, or the service workers that Hochschild describes in her work on emotional labour. In this vein, writing about the changes wrought on the relationships between musicians and their fans by the rise of digital communication platforms, Baym argues that the many terms used to modify contemporary labour—"immaterial, affective, emotional, venture, cultural, creative" (2015, p. 16)—do not adequately capture this phenomenon. Therefore, Baym distinguishes "relational labour" from Hochschild's concept of emotional labour in three key

ways: (1) more than the performance and creation of feeling, relational labour is about building and maintaining *enduring relationships with audiences*; (2) relational labour is *untethered from organisational rules and norms*, with performers "left alone to figure out how to deal with their own and others' emotions and to create whatever kinds of relationships they will have" (Baym, 2018, p. 20); and (3) relational labour is *one-to-many*, where performers "must simultaneously manage the relational demands of each person who reaches them and play to the crowd as a whole, with all of the diverse audiences of allies, antagonists, strangers, and others it contains" (Ibid.). The final point is particularly pertinent to the discussion at hand, concerned as it is with the delicate balancing act between friendly and hostile audience interactions.

Building on Baym's framework, then, this chapter examines relational labour through an intersectional feminist lens, foregrounding the ways in which structural inequalities shape the relationships between creators and their audiences in the influencer industry. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker argue, cultural producers hold great power in society but an analysis of the "highly unequal ways in which such power is distributed and of how control is maintained" is essential for an adequate account of creative labour (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008, p. 103). While all creators must perform relational labour and manage relational boundaries as they attempt to strike a balance between closeness and distance with audiences, I argue that those from historically marginalised groups—especially those creating stigmatized genres of content—find themselves on an uneven playing field in the challenges they face as well as the coping strategies at their disposal. It is with this in mind that I turn to literature concerning harmful creator-audience interactions, such as trolling and harassment, framed by the ubiquity of racism, misogyny, and transphobia online.

6.2 Toxic technocultures: Harassment, misogynoir and networked misogyny

In her book *How to stay safe online* (2022), Seyi Akiwowo draws on a sad but unshocking set of statistics: globally, women are 27 times more likely than men to be harassed online, Black women are 84% more likely to be harassed than white women, there has been a 71% rise in online disability abuse, and 78% of LGBTQ+ people have experienced hate speech online (Akiwowo, 2022). Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" in 2008 to describe the

"amalgamation of anti-Black racism and misogyny… that targets Black trans and cis women", particularly in visual and digital culture (2016, p. 2). More broadly, Massanari analysed the flourishing of what she calls "toxic technocultures" online, which are networked publics that "demonstrate retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race and push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism" through the "implicit or explicit harassment of others" (Massanari, 2017, p. 333).

Scholars have interrogated several dimensions to these phenomena, including platform policies and moderation practices (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2021), technological affordances (Massanari, 2017), and the psychology of trolls (Buckels, et al., 2014). Massanari (2017) utilises actor-network theory to address the ways in which Reddit's design, algorithms and platform policies coalesced to provide fertile grounds for anti-feminist and misogynist activism during two key cultural events, #GamerGate and "The Fappening". "GamerGate" was a misogynistic online harassment campaign that challenged feminism, diversity and progressivism in video game culture, waged primarily in 2014 and 2015 against female and minority game developers and journalists working in the video game industry. "The Fappening" centred on illegally acquired nudes of celebrities distributed and discussed on anonymous websites 4chan and Reddit. Massanari argues that both events "were emblematic of an ongoing backlash against women and their use of technology and participation in public life" (2017, p. 330). Taking a similarly ecological approach, Matamoros-Fernández (2017) explores how the entanglements of the national specificity of racism and the medium specificity of platforms constitute "platformed racism", derived from the design, technical affordances, business models, policies, and cultures of social media platforms. Understanding platforms and users to be mutually shaped, she highlights the dual meanings of platformed racism: firstly, platforms as tools for amplifying and manufacturing racist discourses, both through users' appropriations of their affordances and through their design and algorithmic shaping of sociability. And secondly, a mode of governance that is particularly harmful for some communities, characterised by vague policies, insufficient moderation, and the arbitrary enforcement of rules. She draws on the case study of the booing of Australian Football League Indigenous star Adam Goodes as it was mediated through Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, understanding the unfolding of this controversy as the entanglement between "users' practices to disguise and amplify racist humour and abuse", and the role of platform

features “the circulation of overt and covert hate speech” (p. 930). Despite the assumption of “equal and equitable participation based on the supposedly egalitarian nature of the online world”, Chan and Gray establish the various sociocultural and economic barriers that Black men face as compared to their white counterparts in building visibility and fame as online gamers (2020, p. 359). In the face of the exclusions that Black men experience when they are made visible through gaming livestreaming, Chan and Gray found that many have “shifted their energies away from seeking public attention and building massive platforms”, instead embracing their microcelebrity status within a community of other Black streamers and audience members (Ibid.), a finding that is mirrored in the analysis in this chapter.

While scholars have addressed various contributing factors to the “especially virulent strain of violence and hostility” towards marginalised groups in online environments, Miltner and Banet-Weiser argue that accounts often fail to acknowledge the deep entrenchment and naturalisation of misogyny and racism as structuring logics in Western culture (2016, p. 171). Focussing on specific components of “networked misogyny”, they contend, can serve to distract from the bigger cultural and normative fight at hand. It is with all this in mind that I proceed with my findings and analysis, understanding content creators’ practices of relational labour and boundary setting as shaped by platform cultures and affordances, but ultimately situated within and inseparable from broader structural inequalities in the influencer industry and society that I have explored throughout this thesis.

6.3 Relational boundaries: An intersectional analysis of content creator practices

In the analysis that follows I explore some of the practices that creators employ as they attempt to manage relational labour and boundaries with their audiences, with an emphasis on how identity plays a part in this dynamic. As I have explored in this thesis, contrary to highly celebratory discourses that position online content creation as more open and meritocratic than traditional cultural industries, this is an advertising-driven industry that propels the most profitable creators into the spotlight, those who do not disrupt the neoliberal status quo. It is within the context of the systemic sociocultural, technological and commercial exclusions explore in the previous chapters that I seek to understand the relational labour that marginalised content creators, and especially those making stigmatized

genres of content, are required to perform as they strive for stable careers and income in the influencer industry.

6.3.1 "I have long resented being the product": Making content versus being content

> Sometimes it seems like you're just there to be a Sims family playing house. The journey of your channel isn't about growing your creative style. It's about playing the game of life in public. You want some hit content? Get married, have kids, get a dog, do life. Do it all, do it right now as hard and fast as you can until your feet set on fire and we all laugh spectacularly when it burns to the ground! (Daniel Howell, 2022)

In a video titled "Why I Quit YouTube", British YouTuber Dan Howell reflects on the existential clash between *making* content and *being* content, identifying the latter as an essential ingredient for success in the influencer industry. With his characteristic deadpan humour, he gets right to heart of what is means to work as a social media content creator: *the commodification of the self*. For Dan, navigating relational labour is a deeply ambivalent process. "How much do you open up?" he muses, recognising the potential success that comes with sharing aspects of his personal life, but also the pitfalls: "Getting people invested in the story of your life like a soap opera [means that] when life changes for you, people come and go, the audience is angry with you because you've ruined their favourite TV show" (Daniel Howell, 2022). His story is not unique; every content creator I spoke to grappled with how to present themselves, how much to share of their life, and how to relate to their audience(s). Many expressed that the cultural imperative towards intimacy made them variously feel exposed, exploitative, and answerable to entitled audiences who felt that they deserved to have a say in their life choices.

For some creators, the answer to this dilemma was to try to decenter themselves—their everyday lives, beliefs, and relationships—and to lean more into *making* rather than *being* content. For example, Dr Simon Clark is a science EduTuber[24] whose YouTube channel gained popularity through vlogging about his life as a PhD student in atmospheric physics at Exeter

[24] A portmanteau of 'education' and 'YouTuber'.

University. When I interviewed Simon in October 2018 he was at a fork in the road, having just completed his PhD and trying to figure out his next career steps. He was acutely aware that his audience was drawn to his channel more for his personality, life, and opinions than to learn about science, but he felt deeply uncomfortable about commodifying himself in this way. So, he had decided to actively move away from personality-driven content—even though, as he put it, he would make "so much more money" from it—and towards creating a science education show that he could feel proud of and happier to monetise through advertising and merchandise. The month after our interview, Simon released a blog post that put it this way:

> I have long resented being the product, my face being the reason that people came to my channel rather than how I talked about things. Introducing a bit more distance between me and my ability to earn a living is definitely going to be beneficial for my mental health. (Clark, 2018)

In a video released the following year titled "A letter to myself ten years ago", Simon describes how as a vlogger his "lived existence on Earth was a commodity. Something to be bottled, refined, and sold" (Simon Clark, 2019). Because of this, he felt he had to constantly be "market ready", which resulted in "the strain to pretend that everything is fine at all times. And then the extra strain or fear of being found out, that you are selling a product that is not what it claims to be" (Simon Clark, 2019).

Lifestyle and fashion creator Lucy Moon similarly told me during our interview in November 2018 that she had decided to take a step back from personality-driven content, though for her it was a direct response to unwanted audience interactions and critique. As she told me:

> April last year was probably the most successful that I've been, every video was getting like 150,000 views. I was doing really well, I was on trending all the time, and I was deeply unhappy because of all the attention I was getting. When you get positive attention and people fascinated with your life, you also get a lot of negative and a lot of uninvited commentary. For me, and I think for everyone, it's really difficult to deal

> with because on an internet platform like YouTube, you can't avoid it. You are being fed it constantly: it's being tweeted at you, it's being commented on your videos… I can't deal with receiving it every day. (Lucy Moon interview, November 2018)

Lucy had therefore decided to pivot her content towards fashion and beauty and away from talking about "really controversial and very deeply personal topics" such as her issues with food, alcohol and sex. Although, as she said, female beauty and fashion creators actually get "a lot more stick" and are "scrutinised on a whole other level", she felt better able to cope with it because whereas previously audiences were scrutinising her "whole life and elements of [her] personality", now the subject matter felt more removed. A further benefit of this pivot was the intentional weeding out of male viewers:

> I have pretty much 90% women watching me, which is perfect. I don't want men because I felt really unsafe when I had men following me. Still now I get creepy comments, but they feel more distant... also now I don't have like 4chans where they're trying to find pictures of me in bikinis, thank God. (Lucy Moon interview, November 2018)

Comparing Simon and Lucy's experiences provides valuable insights into the ways in which a creator's identity and content genre impacts their approach to relational labour and boundary setting. Despite relational labour taking its toll on his mental health, as a white, straight, cisgender man in the high CPM topic-driven vertical of science EduTube, Simon possesses immense privilege in being able to decide between either *making* or *being* content without the fear of demonetisation and loss of sponsorship opportunities, or harassment on the basis of his gender, race or sexuality. His decision was not based on fear of audience critique, but rather to alleviate the internalised pressure to pretend that "everything is fine" when it's not, which says more about the burdens on men not to show public vulnerability. For Lucy, on the other hand, her decision was a direct response to "negative", "unwanted" and "creepy" comments from audience members, an example of the heightened scrutiny and "gendered authenticity policing" that female creators are subjected to (Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt, 2022; see also, Duffy and Hund, 2019).

6.3.2 (Dis)engagement with anti-fans: Harassment and the fear of weaponised intimacy

With 635k subscribers to their YouTube channel of 10+ years and a further 114k subscribers on their second joint channel with their partner "More Ash and Gray"[25], Ash Hardell is one of the most famous and highly visible trans nonbinary influencers in the Western context. They are also an example of a creator who has a very strong audience community, having cultivated intimacy over the years via candid self-disclosure about their sexuality, relationships, and experiences of transitioning, amongst other personal topics. In a video essay titled "Trauma. Transphobia. And the Internet (why I left for 2.5 years)", they talk about the extensive harassment they received from social media audiences, as well as mainstream media, after their coming out video went viral in 2018, exposing their channel to a much broader audience than the predominantly LGBTQ+ viewers they had up until that point (Ash Hardell, 2022). Ash describes how YouTube's algorithms recommended their videos to transphobic creators and their followers, drawing hostile audiences to their channel and creating an incredibly toxic environment, supporting Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt's claim that far from protecting users from hateful expressions, platforms' algorithmic recommendation systems often inadvertently promote and rewards this kind of content (2022, p. 1663).

The self-disclosure that Ash intended for their own audience community thus became ammunition for anti-fans who were able to tap into Ash's deepest insecurities to a point where they developed PTSD symptoms, and worse of all, as they put it, "was gaslit into viewing myself as something dangerous… I was confusing and harming thousands of people who watched my videos, I was convincing cis people that they were trans and ruining lives" (Ash Hardell, 2022). Ash explains that these experiences left them with lingering trauma and shame, wary to share their personal experiences online in the future: "I'm worried that by opening up and sharing my story and confessing to some of my personal self-doubts and struggles in the process, folks may try to weaponise those disclosures against me later" (Ibid.)

[25] As of 13th March 2023.

At its most extreme, *weaponised intimacy* can come in the form of doxxing, or the exposure of private personal information online, which can lead to risks for the recipient, including physical harm. In 2018 Ash was the victim of a doxxing attack, in which their employer was publicly shared online, in a video which amassed more than 500k views in the following months (at this time, Ash also had a non-social media job). Ash spoke to an entertainment lawyer, who explained that in situations of doxxing, most creators do *nothing*. Pursuing legal action is lengthy and expensive, and more importantly any attempt to contact the doxxer or respond publicly almost always results in more controversy and traffic to the original post or issue, "So basically the more you try to address or handle a problem, the harder it becomes to escape it. What a broken system" (Ash Hardell, 2019). Ash's insights chime with what one creator told me in our interview about her experience receiving regular death threats against herself and her family:

> Don't reply to it. Don't tweet. Some people get death threats or accusations and they tweet about it endlessly. It just makes it worse. I do read the people who subtweet me sometimes, it's quite frustrating that people will say things that I know are not true, or they've very uncharitably interpreted what I've said. I could post about it, I could make a big thing about it, but then I've exposed 10 times the audience to it. If only one in 10 of my audience go "oh actually I do agree with that person" then I've just created 1000, 10,000 more people who don't like me. That's the lesson I fortunately learned from other people's mistakes. There are some creators, who I won't name, who cannot stop posting. They ruin their careers because of it. (Anonymised interviewee, August 2019)

Thus, the most absolute way to defend against online attackers becomes *silence*: creators are pressured not to respond to harassers and doxxers or talk about anything personal publicly online that could be weaponised. For Ash, the doxxing and barrage of transphobic messages that they received was so intense that they were driven away from YouTube altogether for more than two years, before building up the resolve to return and address what had happened out of a sense of duty to challenge the "far-reaching and diverse hatred towards trans people online" and to get "the closure that comes with having control over [one's] own narrative" (Ash Hardell, 2022).

On a panel about influencer mental health at Summer in the City 2019, one Black creator said that trolling and hate "just comes with the territory" and you have to *develop a thick skin* to work as a social media creator. This was a trope that I heard many times throughout my fieldwork and interviews, particularly from marginalised creators and those whose content deals with controversial topics, and highlights the individualisation of risk and harm as a structural norm in the influencer industry.

6.3.3 "Those are my people": Retreating into private community spaces and dealing with obsessive fans

I met Ahsante Bean (AKA Ahsante the Artist) on my first fieldwork trip to VidCon US in 2018. She is a creator who has been making YouTube videos since 2013 about personal growth, productivity, intersectionality, identity, and social justice, with the goal to share stories that inspire her audience community "to move consciously and creatively through life" (Ahsante Bean, 2022). She is also the former Associate Director of Programming at PBS Digital Studios, where amongst other things she created *Say It Loud*, an educational series on YouTube celebrating Black history and culture. Ahsante told me in our interview in August 2022 that as her audience had grown, the quality of conversation in her YouTube comments section had diminished, with an influx of hostile audience members on some of her more controversial videos who were "disrupting the sense of community in the comments" and "mostly just grandstanding about their own beliefs and trying to use my platform to promote whatever their agenda was".

As a result, in July 2022 Ahsante posted a video on her channel titled "I'm leaving… come with me" (Ahsante Bean, 2022), in which she explains her decision to pivot to a new YouTube channel focussed solely on video essays, in parallel with a migration of her audience interactions away from the YouTube comments section and towards her Patreon, which she justified in this way:

> I want it to be focussed on having a consistent dialogue with folks who are in my corner, who know and love my work, and who want to support the quality of my

> creative career… Going forward it's going to be the main place where I'm engaging and commenting and discussing my ideas with people who really care about them. The public internet can be a ruthless, hypercritical place. YouTube comment sections can be pretty dicey. But the Brilliant Beans [Patreon], those are my people, that's where I'm going to be hanging out the most, and that's where I'll be able to have more personal, meaningful, thoughtful dialogue. (Ahsante Bean, 2022)

Like Ahsante, many creators retreat into the private community crowdfunding space of Patreon in a bid to communicate with a smaller and more invested subsection of their audience, while avoiding negative and unproductive audience interactions on public platforms. As previously discussed, Patreon has the additional benefit of creating an audience-centric revenue stream not directly tied to algorithmic visibility, particularly important for creators who face regular algorithmic discrimination. For Ahsante, this meant she could pursue a "quality over quantity" approach, against YouTube's imperatives to "publish or perish" and put out "attention grabbing" content. Crowdfunding also aligned with Ahsante's personal investment in the values of public service media:

> That's actually the way that you get content that is accountable to the audience that is serves… Whoever is paying you, that's who you're serving, that's the client. So if the audience is paying me then I'm really looking out for my audience… If brands are paying me then that's who I'm accountable to, that's who I have to satisfy and make happy, and I don't want to do that. (Ahsante Bean interview, August 2022)

For Ahsante the benefits of receiving her income directly from her audience easily outweighed the opportunities of more a commercially driven business model. Fortunately, she had only had positive experiences with her Patreon community[26] up to that point who were extremely supportive of whatever content she put out. This aligns with what I heard at the Patreon panel at VidCon UK 2019, where panellists said that while Patreon is structured around the idea of audiences paying creators in exchange for special perks, such as merchandise and exclusive content, many become patrons because they understand the

[26] Ahsante had 65 Patrons at the time of our interview in August 2022.

precarity of content creation as a career and want to provide financial support, as well to be part of that creator's inner circle, with access to a more intimate paywalled community setting.

For others, the relational labour of cultivating an intimately invested audience to whom they were directly accountable was extremely taxing. For example, one trans "BreadTube" creator—a critical leftist video essay genre addressing such topics as philosophy, race, gender, capitalism and politics—told me in our interview in October 2019 that her decision to bring the deeply personal topics into some of her videos had generated an "overwhelmingly positive" response from her audience and helped to foster a "wonderful community". However, she said that the major downside of this intimacy was that it had given rise to not one, but "a few" stalkers. One person had started turning up to a lot of her live events and launched a charity campaign in her name, using her official artwork without permission. She told them that they had gone too far and had to stop, after which they started their own YouTube channel and became one of her "biggest critics". At the time of our interview there was another person who had been stalking her for the past few months, who was "obsessed" and thought they were "in some kind of relationship". She had never gone to the police over death threats, of which she had received many, but she did feel it necessary to go the police about this stalker. We can understand obsessive fan behaviour like stalking as another form of *weaponised intimacy*, different but no less harmful than hate-fuelled iterations. Our interview was before she came out publicly as trans, and so despite these negative experiences with obsessive fans, she still recognised her privilege:

> It could be worse. As a white, cis guy on YouTube, I even have the easy version of stalkers, because it's not like they're trying to cut my head off, quite the opposite. At the moment at least they are very fond of me. I even get the easy version of that. (Anonymised interviewee, October 2019)

Her approach mirrored Livingstone's findings in her study of teenagers' use of social networking sites, that they "must and do disclose personal information in order to sustain intimacy, but they wish to be in control of how they manage this disclosure" (2008, p. 405). This creator used the fact that she creates scripted content, which often blurs the line

between fact and fiction, as a tactic for maintaining relational boundaries with her audience: she could always "write stuff off as a joke". For example, when she had used BDSM gear in a video, audience members speculated whether she already owned it or had bought it as a prop, but, as she told me gleefully, "They'll never know". She was thus able to use this ambivalence to diffuse some of the more intense expectations of intimacy with her audience.

6.3.4 "The public internet can be a ruthless, hypercritical place": Turning off comments

Ahsante had made the rare choice to turn off comments completely on her new YouTube video essay channel. Whilst it's common knowledge that YouTube comments sections are a prime location for harassment and hate, especially for marginalised creators, it is extremely unusual for creators to turn off the comments, which highlights the pressures they are under to open themselves up to public scrutiny in the course of engaging in relational labour with their audiences. Ahsante, however, had made peace with this decision. She told me that she had big plans to grow her new channel to a significant size and would be creating video essays dealing with controversial topics such as race and intersectionality, and therefore expected harassment. She had dealt with this in the past when her videos about race had been pushed out by YouTube's algorithms to a wide audience, which had resulted in "people sending their army over and the comments getting deluged" and had found that disabling the comments was the most effective and absolute means of shutting down the harassment of herself and her audience-community. Informed by her background in journalism, she also felt an ethical duty towards her audience to provide "a productive and safe space" in the comments section. This was only achievable through active moderation, which she was unwilling to spend hours of her time performing and unable and pay someone else to do. As she told me, "It's the Wild West down there… A lot of [journalistic] publishers had a moment where everyone turned the comments section off because they realised it's just a garbage fire… but it's a different norm with influencers and YouTubers".

Ahsante's decision to move her audience interactions behind the Patreon paywall and set the unusually firm boundary of switching off public YouTube comments can be seen as the logical conclusion of the approach of Duguay's participants, who considered switching to other

platforms with “more privacy features” because of the affectively draining process of constantly having the delete comments and block/report users (2019, p. 6).

6.3.5 “I’m not your friend”: Disavowing audience intimacy altogether

While the sections above exemplify the difficult line that creators walk between maintaining relational intimacy and boundaries with their audiences, in a break with the cultural norm some creators were entirely unambivalent in disavowing audience intimacy altogether. For Taha Kahn, the expectation of intimacy from audiences was extremely disconcerting and enough to put him off making videos:

> I'm highly uncomfortable with it. It was very, very strongly one of the reasons that I stopped making videos very frequently. The bigger my audience got, the more I sensed the parasocial relationship. The more people on Twitter would reply to me as if they were my friends, the less I liked that, the less I engaged with it. I didn't enjoy it at all. I found it really uncomfortable. I wanted to shake people and be like, “Please don't interact with me like this. You are interacting with me like you think you're my friend, but you are not”. It reveals something about their perception of their proximity to me. (Taha Khan interview, August 2019)

On the “Mental Health” panel at VidCon London 2019 I heard speakers discuss how they managed relational boundaries with audience members who saw them as a support system. Hannah Witton said that she received a lot of direct messages from viewers in crisis, who related to her and feel that she could help them, unsurprising considering that Hannah gives sex, relationship, parenting and disability advice on her channel. However, she felt that it would be irresponsible to enter into relationships with audience members where they might become dependents, because “what if then one day I couldn’t reply, and they had no one else to speak to?” She felt an immense pressure as a creator with a large audience—many of whom saw her as a friend or confidant—but had decided to implement a hard-line policy never to reply to these sorts of direct messages. Nonetheless, Hannah still actively responded to and interacted with her audience in many places, including her Instagram and YouTube comments, on Patreon, and on her dedicated audience Discord server.

The most explicit disavowal of audience intimacy that I encountered during fieldwork was from Arrows Fitz, a well-known content creator and model based in L.A. Despite talking about deeply personal topics on his YouTube channels about his experiences of being Black, pansexual and trans nonbinary, Arrows posted a video in January 2022 in which he set out in no uncertain terms that he neither has nor wants any kind of intimate relationship with his audience[27]. As he puts it:

> Since this is very personal information about my life, about my sexuality, I do need to set some boundaries with all of you between me the creator and you the viewer… I don't post… to acquire fans, I do not want that responsibility at all in any way. I've tried it, don't like it. Nor do I do this to find community or love for myself, I have too much of that already… I'm just here to grow as an artist and to get some cash. If you're looking for acknowledgement or connection from me in any way, I've got nothing for you. It's important to remember that we are strangers, so you don't owe me to keep watching this video, you don't owe me a comment, you don't owe me a share, you don't owe me anything. And I don't owe you a conversation if you ever see me in person, nor do I owe you a response if you reach out to me. (Arrows Fitz, 2022)

In the description box below the video, Arrows lists a number of helplines that audience members could refer to, including the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Trans Lifeline US.

6.4 Marginalisation and the intimacy triple bind

In the afterword to the twentieth anniversary edition of *The Managed Heart* (1983/2002), Hochschild reflects on a growing third sector of social life, which she terms "marketised private life", a merging of the public work and private family cultures that the original book was structured around. We can understand content creators as examples par excellence of marketised private life, with creators incentivised to form intimate connections with their

[27] Ahsante Bean pointed me towards this video during our interview as a particularly interesting and unusually firm example of a content creator setting boundaries with their audience.

audiences, marking a profound collapse of the already murky boundary between work and play endemic to labour in the Cultural and Creative Industries (Gill and Pratt, 2008). They practise what Casey and Littler term "digital identity labour… in which the identity of the self is crafted, commoditized and monetized for profit" (2022, p. 496). As Baym argues, for creatives, online workplace environments are populated by people you want to reach, but also "those who hate you and those who love you too much", and they therefore need to present a self appropriate to both home *and* work, or else find a way to keep identities distinct across contexts (2018, p. 192). What this looks like for different people varies greatly, and it has not been my intention in this chapter to flatten out the range of experiences of content creators who face diverse challenges, or to suggest that there is a universal model for capturing their approaches to relational labour. Instead, I am interested in exploring the patterned ways in which creators' identities and content genres shape their experiences with audiences, attending to questions of intersectional inequalities, with a view to understanding how the influencer industry provides both openings and foreclosures for specific kinds of cultural and political participation.

While relational labour and boundary setting are fundamental to the work of all content creators, this research found that the tolls of managing audience relationships are higher for marginalised creators—especially those whose content deals with intersectional feminist politics that attracts particular vitriol online—who find themselves in what I call the *intimacy triple bind*: (1) these creators face complex systemic technological, sociocultural and commercial exclusions that impact their visibility and income-generating opportunities, as established in previous chapters; (2) they are therefore under increased pressure to rely on audiences directly for financial support via crowdfunding on platforms like Patreon, and tipping apps such as CashApp, Buymeacoffee and Venmo; (3) however, for these creators, who are already at high risk of harassment and doxxing, the imperative to perform relational labour required for an audience-dependent income model comes with higher risks to their mental health and safety in the form of weaponised intimacy, from both hostile and enamoured audience members. We can see particularly visible examples of this dynamic in high-profile trans female BreadTube creators such as ContraPoints and Kat Blaque, who are doubly marginalised on the basis of both their identities and their content and rely heavily on their audiences for financial support (Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021).

Hochschild argues that a certain degree of disengagement is required to manage the psychological tolls of emotional labour and maintain the sustainability of these jobs: "The only way to salvage a sense of self-esteem… is to define the job as 'illusion making' and to remove the self from the job, to take it lightly, unseriously" (1983/2002, p. 93). But the vulnerability of being a social media content creator, a job that requires the cultivation of intimate connections with audiences—of disclosing deeply personal aspects of their lives, identities, beliefs and experiences, which may then be weaponised against them—is next to impossible to take lightly. However thick one's skin may be, the harassment, death threats, doxxing and hate speech that are common experiences for many marginalised creators who speak about their identities and experiences online raises serious questions about the viability of content creation as a career for these groups, as well as the lack of accountability and responsibility that platforms show towards the creators who generate profit for them.

As Baym puts it, "the new demands of intimacy can be too much: too commercial, too much time, too much interaction, too much expectation, too much vulnerability, too much risk" (2018, p. 178). Through studying practices of relational boundary setting, it became clear that despite the visibility mandate that structures the influencer industry, many of the tactics that marginalised creators employ involve some sort of *retreat*: away from confrontation, away from virality, away from the public internet, or away from audiences altogether. The influencer industry, far from being the bastion of diversity and meritocracy where anyone can make it as a creator if they just have enough talent, determination, and an entrepreneurial spirit, can be an incredibly hostile environment for these creators.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions: Ways forward for the platformised creative worker

I began this project with the broad aim to gain a rich understanding of the lives and labour of content creators working in the influencer industry, beyond public perceptions and celebratory industry discourses. Observing the inductive nature of ethnographic research whereby themes and questions emerged from fieldwork, as the project progressed it became animated by a broader desire to understand the ways in which creative labour is being reshaped by the platformisation of the Cultural and Creative Industries.

Chapter 2 situated this project theoretically and conceptually within the canon of cultural studies research on creative labour and Critical Media Industry Studies, which centre questions of power, identity, inequality and the agency of cultural workers within the larger structural imperatives of the media industries. Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies was introduced to provide a theory of identity categories as reciprocally constructing phenomena that shape complex social inequalities, inflected with an internet studies lens. In Chapters 4-6 I presented an empirically grounded analysis of the platformisation of creative labour, examining the sociocultural, technological, and commercial factors that shape the work of social media content creators, with an attentiveness towards which creators are able to gain visibility and success, and conversely who is systematically excluded from opportunities.

I began this thesis by considering the powerful techno-utopian myths that continue to shape public perceptions of content creator labour and attract droves of people to try to build careers in the influencer industry: *autonomy*, *freedom*, *openness*, *meritocracy*. The more time I spent in the field talking to creators, the clearer it became that these depictions are fundamentally flawed. This disconnection between celebratory discourses and the lived realities of content creators has been the driving force behind this thesis. Like most cultural

myths there are grains of truth in the above claims, which makes them all the more insidious. It *is* the case that anyone with a smartphone and internet access can create content and post it to social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, with the possibility that it may go viral and launch a creative career. It is also true to a certain extent that content creators have greater autonomy, less oversight, and fewer gatekeepers than the majority of cultural workers, particularly in the early stages before they take on management and start working with brands and other related stakeholders. For these two reasons, it is fair to say that social media platforms do enable a broader range of people to participate in cultural production, as well as more diverse on-screen representations than television and film. With such low barriers to entry, the promise of creative freedom, and the potential for huge success, it is clear why this career trajectory is so appealing for many people who feel disenfranchised by the harsh realities of simply *getting a job* in legacy Cultural and Creative Industries. But as I argued throughout this thesis, whilst the so-called "frictionless entry" (Parker et al., 2016) of social media platforms gives the impression that platformised cultural industries are more open and egalitarian than legacy media, in the "economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser, 2018) of the influencer industry there are more insidious structures of power and exclusion at play.

In this final chapter, I present my conceptualisation of the *platformised creative worker*, who I argue represents an intensification of the neoliberal worker-subject as theorised in legacy Cultural and Creative Industries, facing heightened conditions of both precarity and inequality. Further, I make explicit the theoretical, conceptual, empirical, and methodological contributions of the project. I begin in with a recap of the research questions and a summary of how my empirical findings answered them. Next, I draw out the contributions of the thesis to two bodies of literature: the platformisation of creative labour and industries, and research on the influencer industry and content creator labour. Having elucidated the contributions of the thesis, I briefly explore two important avenues that stemmed from this project. Firstly, I consider ways forward for platformised creative workers, exploring how precarity and inequality in the influencer industry might be resisted through collective action, unionisation, and regulation. And secondly, I survey the platform initiatives that are emerging that seek to tackle inequalities happening on and exacerbated by them. To conclude, I provide a final reflection on the project before turning to directions for future scholarship.

7.1 Research questions and summary of findings

Two research questions were posed in Chapter 1:

(1) *What are the distinctive sociocultural, technological and commercial factors that shape the experiences of content creators working in the influencer industry?*

(2) *Which creators are able to gain visibility and success, and how are certain groups and types of content systematically excluded in the influencer industry?*

Further, as the research progressed an overarching research question developed: *How is creative labour being reshaped by the platformisation of the Cultural and Creative Industries?*

In this section, I summarise the empirical findings from Chapters 4-6, with a focus on how the analysis provided answers to these research questions. All three empirical chapters engaged with each question in different ways, rather than tackling a discreet research question each, with some sections concerning the conditions of precarity that characterise content creator labour more generally, and other sections deal more concretely with the ways in which these conditions exacerbate and solidify structural inequalities across intersections of race, gender, sexuality, ability and gender in the influencer industry.

7.1.1 Precarity, hierarchy and structural inequalities in the influencer industry

Chapter 4, *"We're all told not to put our eggs in one basket": precarity, hierarchy and structural inequalities in the influencer industry*, presented the core argument of the thesis, that platformisation has resulted in the intensification of the neoliberalisation of creative labour, with platformised creative workers facing new and complex challenges and insecurities. To make this claim, the chapter mapped out some of the significant ways in which precarity and inequality are exacerbated for content creators in the influencer industry.

First, I addressed a common trope in the influencer industry, “not to put all your eggs in one basket”. Building their careers on ever-shifting ground, content creators are obligated to diversify their outputs across many platforms and income streams, spread-betting their labour in order to mitigate risk in rapidly changing and unstable contexts. At a fundamental level, I found that there is a deep-seated anxiety in the creator community, that a platform that appears to be a pillar of the social media ecology can disappear overnight, resulting in a situation where creators can never feel truly comfortable or secure, no matter how much success they might accrue. The responsibility for managing this precarity sits squarely on their shoulders, in the face of platforms that show a lack of accountability and care towards the creators that generate profit for them. As a result, I argued that the majority of content creators’ working lives are fraught with uncertainty, stress and burnout. With no safety net or clear parameters for what is required to ensure success, creators are incentivised to maintain a frenetic pace of content output, with a carefully curated combination of AdSense revenue, brand collaborations, affiliate links, merchandise and books sales, live shows, speaking appearances and crowdfunding, supported by popularity across a wide range of unpredictable platforms, all seen as part of a well-rounded career.

In response to these conditions of precarity, creators are compelled towards acute self-scrutiny and self-optimisation according to the barrage of audience analytics and popularity metrics available to them. Some of my participants embraced this neoliberal self-improvement discourse, understanding the metrics that undergird success in the influencer industry as a meritocracy that rewards hard work and “talent”, whilst others viewed it more cynically as a rigged system built on a set of misguided values (visibility, notoriety, fame). Nonetheless, most creators reflected that their mood and sense of self-worth was heavily impacted by their metric success, as a fundamental determinant of their income and career opportunities. Even when creators did achieve metric success, many echoed the sentiment that the benchmark for success merely increased: the quest for visibility never fulfilled, the promise of having “made it” always deferred, with the only satisfactory option being a constant state of growth.

In this deeply hierarchical industry where “to be visible… is to be rendered valuable” (Duffy and Hund, 2019, p. 4996), I argued that every challenge that full-time professional content

creators face is exponentially exacerbated in the lives of smaller and aspiring creators. This finding emerged most clearly in my fieldwork with the London Small YouTubers community, who reflected that not only were they being sidelined by platforms like YouTube—who were deemed to have closed the gates of algorithmic recommendation to smaller creators because they cannot handle the amount of content being uploaded—but also by other industry intermediaries such as event organisers, talent managers and social media marketers. As the influencer industry has grown to become more formalised and commericalised, the categories of (celebrity) "creators" and their "fans" have become reified, with industry intermediaries flocking to monetise this relationship. In this equation, small creators find themselves in an awkward position, identifying with neither category and increasingly unable to become professional creators in their own right, excluded from monetising opportunities such as AdSense revenue, brand collaborations and crowdfunding for protracted periods of time, if indeed they ever make it to that point.

Having explored some of the broader sociocultural, technological and commercial factors that shape the experiences of content creators working in the influencer industry, I turned my attention to the question of exclusions. During fieldwork, I witnessed the pervasiveness of Silicon Valley-imbued celebratory discourse regarding the diversity and inclusivity of the influencer industry and a seemingly sincere belief in the world-changing potential of social media creators. This discourse came through most clearly at industry events from platform representatives and other intermediaries such as social media marketers and talent agents, and sometimes from creators themselves. However, during fieldwork and interviews I found that contrary to such discourses, creators making stigmatized and less brandable content genres, and especially content creators from historically marginalised groups, face complex compounding barriers to earning a living and achieving visibility in the influencer industry, mapping onto well-worn inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality and disability. They are systematically excluded from brand deals, industry events and other income generating opportunities, or else paid under the odds (if at all) when they are invited to participate. These creators also face algorithmic discrimination in the form of invisibility and demonetisation (discussed in Chapter 5), as well as heightened levels of trolling, harassment and doxxing (discussed in Chapter 6).

In the influencer industry, I argued that only certain creators and types of content are easily brandable and able to merge with market logics, and platforms' algorithms are designed to render some content more visible than others with the logic of this asymmetry is based on profitability. The close alignment between the interests of advertisers and the governance of platforms means that the most profitable creators are propelled into the spotlight, those who do not disrupt the neoliberal status quo: white, straight, male, middle class, cisgendered, *brand-friendly*. Thus, I argued that not only are certain content creators subject to long standing discriminations, but *new* forms of structural inequality are emerging in particular ways as the result of the platformisation of creative labour.

7.1.2 "The Algorithm" in platformised creative work

Where Chapter 4 aimed to map out the broader context of precarity and inequality in the influencer industry, Chapter 5, *Omnipotent God, black box, oppressor? "The Algorithm" in platformised creative work,* zoomed in on algorithms as one of the central mechanisms that perpetuates such conditions for platformised creative workers. Aligned with critical qualitative approaches that understand algorithms not simply as technological black boxes to be opened but as sociotechnical systems that are park of broader pattern of meaning and practice, I examined multifaceted and situated ways that content creators engage with YouTube's algorithmic recommendation system through their *discourses*, *practices* and *experiences*. Similarly to Chapter 4, Chapter 5 began with the broader challenges that all creators face working on platforms structured by algorithmic recommendation systems, before turning in the final section to how such systems perpetuate and exacerbate structural inequalities.

I began with an analysis of creators' discourses, with two prominent themes emerging. First, I found that YouTube algorithmic recommendation system, known colloquially as "The Algorithm", was often painted by participants as an anthropomorphised mythical creature or vengeful God with the power to determine the destinies of creators. Stories of wild victories and catastrophic failures were attributed to it, with creators reflecting feelings of powerlessness in the face of an unknowable, unstable and seemingly arbitrary force. This framing of The Algorithm as a mysterious being served to further obfuscate the human agency

and commercial interests of platforms. In their attempts to understand and respond to the caprices of The Algorithm, content creators have become algorithmic detectives and conspiracy theorists. Throughout fieldwork, I witnessed the passion with which the creator community shares algorithmic hearsay, finding this community crowdsourcing of information to be most intense in the smaller creator community, to whom The Algorithm is understood to be particularly hostile.

Next, I analysed creators' practices, which I argued are informed by algorithmic discourses but not straightforwardly correlated to them. On social media platforms, all different types of content vie for viewers' attention within the same space, and the way that their recommendation algorithms are calibrated plays a key role in determining which genres will thrive and which will die, where a simple shift in how a platform recommends content can have a profound impact on cultural norms and genres. Within these unstable and unpredictable algorithmic contexts, I examined some of the common tactics that content creators employ in order to maximise visibility, such as strategically timing posts, using eye-catching titles and thumbnails, finding a narrow content niche understood to be favoured by The Algorithm, and filming "collabs" with other content creators in order to cross-pollinate audiences. Above all else, creators are motivated to maintain a high content output for fear of algorithmic invisibility, with weekly if not daily uploads understood as the ideal. These pressures have come to a head in recent years, with burnout being one of the most discussed issues in the creator community.

Whilst these tactics to increase visibility are commonplace, creators must simultaneously try to avoid the negative cultural connotations surrounding practices of "gaming The Algorithm". Creators who appear to only chase metric and financial success are often perceived as lacking all-important authenticity, so it is not simply a matter of knowing how YouTube's recommendation system works, but also maintaining the right tone with audiences. Thus, they can easily find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place if their fail to achieve this balance, satisfying neither their audience nor The Algorithm. The extent to which creators practised such algorithmic optimisation tactics varied greatly, often dependent on the cultural norms of the genre that they produced and their audience demographics. Whilst some sat on extreme ends of the spectrum—either rejecting such tactics entirely for reasons of integrity,

or else embracing them as part of the neoliberal self-optimising project—the majority sat somewhere in the middle, trying to find an equilibrium between creating content they were proud of whilst maintaining visibility and therefore financial stability.

The overwhelming sentiments that creators expressed about their experiences working with/against The Algorithm were anxiety, confusion, anger and, above all, fear induced by the ever-present possibility of algorithmic invisibility. Full-time professional creators were afraid that The Algorithm would suddenly and inexplicably render them invisible and destroy their careers, and small aspiring creators were afraid that The Algorithm would never grant them the visibility needed for their careers to take off in the first place. This fear is exacerbated in moments of algorithmic rupture across the platform, and I gave the example of the 2017 AdPocalypse, when a number of high-profile advertisers pulled out of YouTube and in an attempt to appease them the platform drastically tightened how it algorithmically identified "advertiser-friendly" content. This led to a tidal wave of videos being demonetised and deselected for recommendation to viewers, leaving creators feeling blindsided and critical of YouTube for prioritising the interests of advertisers over the creators who provide the labour that generates value for them.

Beyond the precarity that all content creators experience in the face of algorithmic recommendation systems as platformised creative workers, in the final section I turned my attention to the *algorithmic discrimination* that marginalised creators face, which I defined as a process whereby certain content, identities and positionalities within the platform economy are deprioritised from recommendation, in an industry where visibility is key to success. Nowhere is this algorithmic discrimination made clearer than in the ongoing struggles that LGBTQ+ YouTube creators have had with their content being algorithmically demonetised and age restricted due to not being "advertiser and family friendly", despite YouTube presenting itself as a champion of the LGBTQ+ community. As a result, marginalised creators are impelled to employ a variety of tactics to try to overcome algorithmically induced invisibility and earn income, such as removing identifying information from the tags and titles on videos and relying more heavily on crowdfunding platforms. This example highlights the impersonal and anonymous nature of working on social media platforms, where all but the most elite creators are left to fend for themselves with partial information about how their content is

recommended or demonetised and little opportunity to communicate directly with the platforms that host their work.

This chapter found that "The Algorithm" is a powerful character in the lives of professional and aspiring social media content creators, exerting pressures on them in their struggles for visibility; my participants variously understood it an omnipotent God, a black box to be opened, a mystery to be solved, a voracious machine, and an oppressor of marginalised groups. Above all, it was viewed as unknowable, impenetrable, mysterious, and inscrutable. Though creators' experiences varied significantly based on a myriad of factors, amongst my participants The Algorithm was universally understood as an antagonistic force, one which heightened conditions of precarity and made their working lives more unpredictable and stressful, and for marginalised creators it was experienced as nothing short of hostile.

7.1.3 The intimacy triple bind

In Chapter 6, *The intimacy triple bind: Structural inequalities and relational labour in the influencer industry*, I turned my attention to the relationship between creators and their audiences. The careers of social media content creators, or influencers, live or die by their ability to cultivate and maintain an invested "audience community" (Baym, 2000). To this end, they are encouraged to commodify their personalities, lives and tastes in order to build "authentic" self-brands, appealing on-screen personas, and intimacy with audiences. Whilst it is well established in the literature that content creators are required to practice what has variously been framed as "relational labour" (Baym, 2018) and "emotional labour" (Hochschild, 1983/2002), I argued that there is a lack of attention paid to the unequal distribution of the tolls that managing these audience relationships can take. Situating the analysis within the context of the sociocultural, technological and commercial inequalities explored in Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter examined the ways in which structural inequalities shape the ways that creators approach relational labour and boundaries with their audiences, as they attempt to strike a balance between closeness and distance, and between work and life.

To do this, I built a dialogue between two seemingly disparate bodies of work: content creators' relational labour, on the one hand, and the formation of "toxic technocultures" (Massanari, 2017), on the other. I suggested that the imperative of relational labour and the flourishing of toxic technocultures can—and indeed should—be thought together productively in the context of the influencer industry, both concerning the ways in which affect, pleasurable and painful, circulates between content creators and their audiences. In the analysis I identified and discussed four key tactics that content creators employ to navigate relational labour and boundaries with audiences: (1) leaning into *making* rather than *being* content; (2) (dis)engagement with anti-fans through silence; (3) retreating into private community spaces, away from the exposure of public platforms; and (4) turning off public comments.

I argued that social media content creators are examples par excellence of what Hochschild (1983/2002) termed "marketised private life", incentivised to commodify deeply personal aspects of their lives, identities, beliefs and experiences, marking a profound collapse of the already murky boundary between work and play endemic to labour in the Cultural and Creative Industries. Whilst relational labour and boundary-setting are fundamental aspects of labour for all content creators, this research found that the tolls of managing audience relationships are higher for marginalised creators, especially those whose content deals with intersectional feminist politics. These creators find themselves in what I call the "intimacy triple bind": already at higher risk of trolling and harassment, yet under increased pressure to perform relational labour for economic reasons, adversely opening them up to further harms in the form of "weaponised intimacy". Trans female BreadTube creators are a particularly visible example of this dynamic, doubly marginalised on the basis of both their identities and their content and thus required to rely heavily on their audiences for financial support.

I concluded by highlighting the individualisation of risk and harm as a structural norm in the influencer industry, which raises serious questions about the lack of accountability and responsibility that platforms show towards creators. "Needing a thick skin" is a common trope in the industry, but however thick one's skin may be, the harassment, death threats, doxxing and hate speech that are common experiences for many marginalised creators who speak

about their identities and experiences online raises serious questions about the viability of content creation as a career for these groups.

7.2 Contributions to scholarship

This thesis has sought to extend understandings of the lived experiences of content creators working in the influencer industry, and more broadly how platformisation is reshaping creative labour in the Cultural and Creative Industries. While my findings have been elucidated above, below I draw out what I believe to be the most important contributions of this research to the literature on the platformisation of creative labour and industries, and influencer industries and content creator labour.

7.2.1 Cultural and Creative Industries: The Platformised Creative Worker

In-depth study of content creators labour and the operations of the influencer industry provided me with insights into how creative labour is being reshaped by the platformisation of the Cultural and Creative Industries. Chapter 2 stated the importance of two types of continuities in the study of platformised creative labour: across time and across industries. Recognising that an obsession with the newness and novelty of digital innovations can lead to false claims that cultural production has been transformed "beyond recognition" (Hesmondhalgh, 2012/2019, p. 6), I drew on the rich research conducted on the neoliberalisation of creative labour across various pre-platformised industries as a theoretical anchor to consider the platformisation of creative work. Equally, while acknowledging the wide range of experiences for different types of cultural workers, I concurred with Duffy, Poell and Nieborg that "such diversity does not belie their productive points of overlap which, together, reveal the potential for a systematic examination of the platform practices of the cultural industries" (2019, p. 6). Taking up this call to arms, I present the *platformised creative worker* as a key central conceptual contribution of this thesis, who I argue marks an intensification of the neoliberal worker-subject as previously theorised, facing heightened conditions of precarity and inequality.

Although platformised creative work bears many of the hallmarks of the "neoliberal worker-subject" identified by researchers of the Cultural and Creative Industries going back three decades, through a synthesis of existing literature (explored in Chapter 2) and my empirical analysis I argue that it is also characterised by a number of novel features. These include: complex, fragmented working environments involving multiple platform, each with distinct sociotechnological arrangements and challenges; extreme levels of datafication whereby analytics and metrics become increasingly central, reinforcing hierarchy and competition-based modes of interaction; the expectation that audiences should have direct, continuous and immediate access to cultural workers, and that cultural workers should increasingly share aspects of their private lives with audiences; a situation wherein cultural producers become dependent on platforms, whilst simultaneously unable to communicate grievances directly with these platforms; increasingly individualistic and risky labour conditions in unstable platform environments, paired with fewer legal protections and further challenges to collective action; the need for cultural producers to bend themselves to the logics of algorithmic visibility as the structuring principal for success; and a necessity for cultural workers to align their self-brands with those of platforms, shaped most significantly by the interests and values of advertisers, leading to an intensification of commercialism and an escalation of structural inequalities.

Through the empirical analysis, I explored how these diverse factors shape the lived experiences of content creators working in the influencer industry, finding that they coalesce to exacerbate conditions of precarity and inequality for cultural workers in platformised environments. Framing micro ethnographic insights—the experiences, practices, discourses, subjectivities and agency of content creators—within macro structures of power and intersecting inequalities, this work contributes to the literature on the platformisation of creative industries and labour, beyond totalising top-down critiques of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017).

7.2.2 An ethnographic approach to creator labour

The latitude to engage in such long-term, in-depth and multi-sited fieldwork granted by the nature of being a PhD researcher is central to the unique contribution that the thesis brings

to scholarship on platformised creative labour and influencer industries. Such freedom of time is rarely afforded to more senior scholars, and it enabled me to gain insights that would not have been possible otherwise. As explained in Chapter 3, I engaged in several ethnographic methods throughout the project: online participant observation, offline participant observation, ethnographic semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography in the form of becoming a YouTuber myself. The diversity of my data collection is reflected across the exceptional breadth of creators' identities and levels of professionalism, as well as the genres of content that they produced.

To recap, key participants represented a broad range of identity categories in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class and ability. Interested as I was in understanding the disparate experiences of elite professional content creators and small aspiring creators, my most successful key participant had 2.2 million subscribers on YouTube and my smallest had just one. Participants also worked across a wide variety of prominent and niche genres, including lifestyle, beauty, gaming, BookTube, educational (sex, science and ethnomusicology), daily/weekly vloggers, video essayist (philosophy and cultural studies), animation, LGBTQ+ and feminism, political commentary, reviews (film and tech), travel, trending vlog challenges and tags, comedy, acting tutorials, and short scripted films. I believe this ability to talk across genres, to find shared content creator experiences as well as overarching patterns of exclusion in the influencer industry, to be one of the main strengths and contributions of the project. Many studies of influencer culture to date have focused on discreet platforms (for example, Bishop has predominantly focused on YouTube and Duffy on Instagram). However, I studied participants as they worked across the multi-platform environment, in line with their understanding of social media as a dynamic ecosystem, an approach that ultimately led to a more holistic understanding of the nature of platformised creative labour. Cultural producers have complicated relationships with the platforms that they work across, understanding themselves both dependent on and independent from the multiple platforms that house their work.

Whilst a potential downside of analysing a wide range of creators is that it limited my ability to engage in in-depth analysis of genre-specific norms and culture, this limitation was outweighed by what it afforded the project. Beyond allowing me to analyse creators'

discourses, practices and experiences in detail (as exemplified by Chapter 5), this breadth allowed me to step back an assess the sociocultural, technological and commercial dynamics of the industry as a whole, essential for understanding the ways in which structural inequalities are emerging and are sustained.

7.2.3 The influencer industry: An intersectional framework

This thesis contributes to the literature on content creator labour theoretically and empirically through its intersectional approach to power and inequality, which allowed me to move beyond feminist research that has tended to focus on the dynamics of gender, to address multiple forms of marginalisation in the influencer industry.

In Chapter 2, I explored literature that offers critique of the earnest belief that meritocracy should be the guiding principle for better and more equitable Cultural and Creative Industries, and more broadly of depoliticized understandings of society that are based on notions of liberating individual entrepreneurial agency and creative freedoms (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015; Malik, 2008; 2013; O'Brien et al., 2017; Oakley and O'Brien, 2015; Saha, 2012; 2018). These scholars argue instead that a robust critique of structural power relations—rooted in anti-racist, decolonial and social justice approaches, and critiques of processes of marketization, privatisation and neoliberalisation—is needed to meaningfully address such inequalities. I have embraced this approach to cultural production in this thesis, applying it to the very particular conditions that platformisation has wrought on cultural industries, which ultimately, as I argued above, have led to an intensification of conditions of precarity and inequality for cultural workers. When we consider the case of content creators working in the influencer industry—who are subject to "platform dependence" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), and who far short of having even the possibility of benefitting from equal opportunities policies, are not even granted the most basic employment rights by the platforms that make profit from their content—we can see that the potential for discrimination against those from historically marginalised groups is great.

Whilst this project was profoundly informed by existing feminist research on influencer culture that addresses questions of power, inequality and visibility (for example, Bishop,

2018a; Duffy, 2017; Duffy and Hund, 2019; O'Meara, 2019), this work tends to centre the gendered dimensions of influencer labour within highly feminised genres such as lifestyle and beauty. The complex and overlapping structural inequalities in the influencer industry across different identity categories, positionalities and genres of content came through most clearly in my fieldwork and interviews. By applying an explicitly intersectional framework, inspired by the work of internet studies scholars outside of influencer studies (such as, Brock, 2011; Noble, 2018; Noble and Tynes, 2016; Gray, 2020), this thesis was able to address the interlocking oppressions and mechanisms of marginalisation across the industry. As discussed at the end of Chapter 2, during the latter stages of writing this thesis, more intersectional literature began to emerge from influencer studies scholars, to consider the ways in which creators from a range of historically marginalised groups are disproportionally punished and face higher risks in the influencer industry (for example, Duffy and Meisner, 2022; Duffy, Milter and Wahlstedt, 2022), with which this thesis gladly dialogues.

7.3 Ways forward for the Platformised Creative Worker: Resisting precarity and inequality through collective action, unionisation, and regulation

I have presented a fairly doom and gloom picture of the working conditions of content creators in the nascent influencer industry, but what can be done to improve their situation? With contracts and brand rates kept as closely guarded secrets and a widespread celebration of the *entrepreneurial self-starter*, this industry appears to be the logical conclusion of McRobbie's "labour reform by stealth" (2016, p. 59), without a sense of civic consciousness or collectivism. But there are rumblings that things may be changing, with a number of grass-roots initiatives rising to the challenge of advocating for improved labour conditions for content creators.

O'Meara (2019) analysed influencer "engagement pods" on Instagram as an organic form of worker resistance in the face of challenges to traditional models of labour organising. These communities of creators agree to mutually like, share and comments on one another's posts as a form of cooperative algorithm hacking, in response to the material conditions of platformised environments that stifle agency. We can also see an example of resistance in initiatives like "F*** You Pay Me" (FYPM), a platform that was set up in 2021 "to help creators get paid what they're worth" by allowing them to anonymously submit their experiences

working with particular brands, including how much they were paid and whether they were paid on time (FYPM, 2023). In helping to shed light on which brands are good to work with and how much to charge, FYPM is a powerful tool for creators to tackle commercial exploitation in an industry where historically marginalised groups are consistently paid less for brand partnerships, if at all.

There have also been more formal attempts to organise creator labour. In 2019, the YouTubers Union in Germany joined forces with IG Metall, Europe's largest industrial union, to launch the FairTube campaign to improve communication, fairness and transparency for creators, an organisation that I acted as a consultant for. As the FairTube campaign states on their website, platform workers "typically have no access to the protections enjoyed by employees, such as minimum wage, dismissal protection, occupational health and safety measures, protection from discrimination, or collective rights" (FairTube, 2023). Quoted in The Guardian, founder Jörg Sprave explained that employment law needs to change to acknowledge the new category of workers who earn income from, but are not employed by, these tech giant platforms, citing California's Assembly bill 5 (AB5) as an example, which extended employee status to gig workers such as Uber drivers in 2019 (Tait, 2020). More recently in June 2020, The Creator Union was launched in the UK and the American Influencer Council in the USA. Perhaps the most successful attempt so far has been the Internet Creators Guild, founded in 2016 by online royalty Hank Green, who also founded VidCon, whom I met during fieldwork in Anaheim, California. With a number of high-profile content creators and industry professionals on its board, the Internet Creators Guild crucially had the ear of YouTube. As their Executive Director Anthony D'Angelo told me in an interview in June 2018, the guild would host creator roundtables at the YouTube Space in L.A., where they would take a dozen or so creators to "speak their minds" with the platform.

Nonetheless, the Internet Creators Guild closed down in 2019 due to a number of issues, including an unsustainable financial model and a lack of support from elite full-time creators with "little incentive to collectively look after the little guys" (Stokel-Walker, 2019). In this industry, the withdrawal of labour is also an ineffective bargaining tool, with so many others waiting in the wings to fill the gaps, and platforms are resistant to efforts to organise creator labour. Despite the backing of IG Metall, YouTube still does not recognise the YouTubers

Union. Niebler and Kern explain that the combination of *organisational*, *technological* and *geographical* fragmentations makes it particularly complex for collective action or regulation to occur effectively amongst platformised creative workers (2020, p. 5). The difficulties are clear in an industry with millions of creators working in fragmented multi-platform environments across geographically dispersed countries, each with its own legal framework.

Despite these difficulties, governments are beginning to pay attention to both the economic value that the influencer industry brings, as well as some of the risks and challenges to both content creators and to the general public. In May 2022, the UK government released its first report on influencer culture, the result of a year-long inquiry led by Specialist Advisor Dr Sophie Bishop, to explore the impact that social media influencers are having on UK culture and how the industry operates. In line with the findings of this thesis, the report notes that "Behind the glamour that often colours perceptions of influencers, this is a challenging career beset by diversity issues, pay disparities, and a pervasive lack of employment support and protection" (The Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee, 2022, p. 3). The report identifies a number of regulatory gaps exposed by the industry's rapid growth, particularly around advertising disclosure, which is deemed to be unacceptably low, and protections for children, both as audiences and as influencers themselves.

It is clear that there is a long way to go in terms of reducing precarity and inequality for platformised creative workers, but I share O'Meara's optimistic outlook that in the influencer industry those who "prioritise fellowship with other similarly positioned workers over competitive individualism are heartening and worth continued attention" (2019, p. 9). It is indeed heartening that these sorts of collective organisations seem to be picking up momentum, even if platforms such as YouTube do not recognise them fully yet. As interest in conversations around the regulation of tech giants increases, it seems inevitable that sooner or later the question of labour rights for this new category of platformised creative worker will be addressed on a more serious institutional and legal level.

7.4 The branding of intersectionality: Platform initiatives to tackle inequalities

We have seen a recent proliferation in platform efforts to represent themselves as deeply principled in their commitment to social justice, in a move that Sobande describes as "woke-washing" (2019). I argue that this phenomenon deserves further academic scrutiny in the context of the influencer industry, considering the systemic inequalities explored in this thesis.

In January 2018, I attended the YouTube Creators for Change Summit, an annual event for the now defunct Creators for Change initiative set up in September 2016 to try and promote positive and combat negative content on the platform. YouTube flew all of the fellows and other stakeholders to the Summit—such as people working for NGO's that might partner with YouTube, and policy experts consulting with Google on anti-extremism—to hear and participate in talks, and to network with each other. YouTube appointed a range of Creators for Change fellows, whose content fit with the values and goals of the initiative, in order to "support the next generation of emerging creators using their voice for good on YouTube", with a smorgasbord of topics including "hate, xenophobia, and extremism as well as race and gender" (Creators for Change, 2018). The fellows were eligible to pitch to receive funding and support from YouTube to film projects in line with the Creators for Change initiative, such as popular British Muslim beauty and lifestyle vlogger Dina Tokio's three-part documentary "#YourAverageMuslim", in which she met Muslim women in the UK and Germany who are breaking stereotypes: a weightlifter, a hip-hop dancer, and an organiser of a support programme for Muslim women in prison. Attendees to the Summit were put up at The Hoxton hotel in Shoreditch and treated to an evening party at a trendy bar nearby.

On the first day of the Summit I turned up at 9:30am to the Oval Space near Bethnal Green, in East London. After collecting my badge, I proceeded upstairs to the main space. What struck me immediately was how fashionable and branded the space was. We were in a large room with high ceilings. On one side there was a bar where attendees of the summit could get coffee—very good quality, with a choice of cow, soya and almond milk—fancy green juices and hipster breakfast foods, such as chia seed pudding, all for free. There were expensive-looking gold reusable water bottles for attendees to take rather than plastic or paper cups,

giving the impression that YouTube is an eco-minded and conscientious organisation, in line with the marketing of the event. The walls were white, with slick graphic art and video screens showcasing YouTubers' videos. On one wall there was a large YouTube play button logo, in front of which many attendees were taking pictures for their various social media feeds. I found words like *privilege*, *wealth*, *plush*, *exclusive,* and *corporate* running through my mind. I looked through the programme for the day. At the top there was a blurb outlining Creators for Change as:

> A global initiative that supports creators like you – creators who are tackling social issues and promoting awareness, tolerance and empathy on their YouTube channels. Because no matter what kind of videos we make, we all have the power to help create the world we want.

The programme also contained information about the food, coffee and artwork providers for the event, with blurbs outlining their ethical credentials. For example, the catering company was described as "an award-winning social enterprise that… showcases the culinary talent and cultural heritages of migrant and refugee women", and the coffee provider claimed to "train, support, and employ people affected by homelessness… bringing people together by tackling homelessness one espresso at a time". Much like giving out the reusable water bottles, the decision to use these ethical providers and to present them prominently in the programme struck me as part of a concerted marketing effort on the part of YouTube to paint themselves as deeply principled. I found myself cynically wondering if they go to as much trouble to do this at their other events that are not to do with Creators for Change. I also felt a general scepticism, that only became more pronounced as the day went on, that the Creators for Change initiative tried to deal with a bizarre catch-all array of issues without actually putting these issues into conversation with each other, programmed to strongly steer away from any controversy or disagreement between attendees, instead encouraging impassioned but safe and self-congratulatory exchanges about empowerment and "changing the world" through media. Importantly, there was no meaningful engagement with issues of structural inequality, which would jar with the belief system fundamentally anchored in individualistic notions of meritocracy.

We can see similar dynamics in #YouTubeBlack, which began life as an event in 2016 to celebrate and support Black creators in response critiques of the platform's lack of diverse representation in the content creators that it promoted, through their advertising and marketing materials and through the platform's mechanisms for progression, like YouTube's Maker Studio. But, as Faithe Day argues, here we need to distinguish between Black YouTube, which she defines as "a reflection of an African American CyberCulture", on the one hand, and #YouTubeBlack, which is "a reflection of Corporate Culture", on the other (Day, 2021). As she points out, the creators selected for #YouTubeBlack were already popular Black YouTube celebrities, those who do not disrupt the status quo of deal with overtly political topics, who YouTube benefitted from promoting. As Day puts it, "#YouTubeBlack is an excellent public relations strategy for the platform… the creation of this pseudo/media event and hashtag does the work of promoting the YouTube platform just as much, if not more than, promoting Black YouTube content creators" (Day, 2021). Creators for Change and #YouTubeBlack are prime examples of the widespread neoliberal discourses surrounding social media platforms, that fuse positive social change with exceptionalism and capitalist accumulation, mirroring the "blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism" in the broader cultural industries (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p. 20). As Sobande argues, brands make use of Black social justice activism and intersectional feminism in the content of marketing that "predominantly upholds the neoliberal idea that achievement, social change and overcoming inequality requires individual ambition and consumption, rather than structural shifts and resistance" (2019, p. 2724). Whilst on a surface level the Creators for Change programme and #YouTubeBlack appear to be commendable, when considered within the broader context of YouTube's track record with marginalised creators, they look like highly calculated PR endeavours.

Platforms intensified their efforts to promote social justice causes in the wake of the heightened global visibility of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, when anti-racist and intersectional politics moved from the margins and into mainstream discourse (Banet-Weiser and Glatt, 2023). Since then, we seem to have entered a new phase where platforms are no longer able to frame themselves discursively as neutral vessels for content, as Gillespie posited in his influential article "The politics of 'platforms'" in 2010. In the Summer of 2020, many platforms felt obligated to release statements publicly supporting BLM, despite their historic side-lining of such issues

and their complicitly in upholding racial inequalities. Head of Instagram, Adam Mosseri posted a letter titled "Ensuring Black Voices are Heard" to Instagram's blog on the 15th June 2020, in which he acknowledged the irony that Instagram as a platform "stands for elevating Black voices" whilst simultaneously being a space where "Black people are often harassed, afraid of being 'shadowbanned', and disagree with many content takedowns" (Mosseri, 2020). In the post, he identified four key areas that Instagram were working on in order to respond to racial discrimination on the platform: harassment, account verification, distribution, and algorithmic bias. Further, he highlights how Instagram is striving to be inclusive to other groups that have been historically marginalised on the platform:

> These efforts won't stop with the disparities people may experience solely on the basis of race; we're also going to look at how we can better serve other underrepresented groups that use our product. In the last year alone the feedback we've received from communities like LGBTQ+ groups, body positivity activists, and artists has helped us build a more inclusive product. (Mosseri, 2020)

As Scharff found in her research on classical musicians, we have seen an important shift from previously conducted research on the "unspeakability of inequalities" in the Cultural and Creative Industries (Gill, 2014), to a moment where "inequality talk" has become widespread, with cultural workers aware of ongoing inequalities and discussing them openly (Scharff, 2021). However, she cautions against overly optimistic accounts of this shift, arguing that such conversations do not necessarily pave the way for political change, becoming an end in themselves rather than a means to an end.

Beyond public statements, several longer-term platform initiatives have emerged since 2020 that seek to tackle the inequalities happening on and exacerbated by them, such as the #YouTubeBlack Voices Fund in 2020, an extension of #YouTubeBlack in the form of "a multi-year commitment dedicated to spotlighting and growing Black creators and music on our platform by giving them access to resources to help them thrive on YouTube", including seed funding, training and networking opportunities (YouTube, 2023b). TikTok took a similar strategy with its Black Creator Trailblazers programme in 2021, designed to "nurture and develop 30 talented, emerging Black creators, musicians and artists, further celebrating the

thriving Black creative community on TikTok" (TikTok, 2021). Platform diversity initiatives like TikTok's Black Creator Trailblazers programme and the YouTube Black Voices Fund couch social change within a commercial system through the spectacular visibility of diversity, similar to popular displays of feminism that Banet-Weiser argues are more often about individual identity than collective politics (2018). This approach buys into the all too familiar values of individualism, positivity, gumption, a can-do attitude, rather than doing anything that would hurt the bottom lines of platforms. I therefore understand such initiatives as a form of corporate reputational management to accumulate cultural and economic capital, rather than as presenting any meaningful challenge to structural relations of power. As Banet-Weiser and I argued about the broader context of branding, in the conjunctural moment of 2020 we saw that it became a financial necessity for businesses and corporations to publicly declare their commitment to intersectionality, social justice and anti-racism, or else risk heavy critique and potential boycotting from consumers (Banet-Weiser and Glatt, 2023). And yet there is something profoundly amiss when it becomes personally advantageous for organisations to critique their own privilege in a capitalist, racist and misogynistic system, an indication that "the branding of intersectionality is typically a move that is all surface and no substance" (Ibid., 2023, p. 503).

7.5 Reflections on the thesis and directions for future scholarship

In this chapter I have set out the findings and contributions of this thesis, as well as some thought about ways forward for platformised creative workers and the co-option of social justice narratives by platforms. To conclude, I reflect on the project and consider possible directions for future scholarship.

In terms of research design, delimiting the boundary of my field to contexts in which the influencer community-industry converges, I only had offline interactions with participants within specific professional contexts, mainly at training, networking, and industry events, and occasionally in more informal social settings. I did not set out to observe participants in their homes, spending time with their families and friends, or indeed at work, watching as they produced content. Whilst the latter especially would have been enlightening for this project, I deemed it to be beyond the scope of possibility alongside the other forms of data collection,

choosing to prioritise community-industry settings as they allowed me to see the interactions between the different stakeholder groups such as creators, audiences, platforms, marketers and brands.

This research adopted a cultural studies approach, addressing questions of precarity and inequality within the context of everyday cultural practices. As an ethnographer, I sought to understand macro structures of power in the influencer industry from the ground up, through immersion in community and industry spaces, observing creators interact and hearing them describe their experiences. However, this approach means that certain macrolevel factors are either absent or receded into the background in the analysis: markets, governance, media ownership, and global dynamics of power and capital. I therefore understand this research as complimentary to important work that presents top-down political-economic critiques of platformisation and cultural production (for example, Caplan and Gillespie, 2020; Cunningham, Silver and Craig, 2016; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; 2019; Noble, 2018; Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2021; van Dijck, 2013). Likewise, focused as my analysis was on the experiences of content creators themselves, it provides a thoroughly partial treatment of other industry stakeholders. In this regard, this thesis can be understood as offering another piece of the puzzle to existing research that centres different actors such as social media marketers (Bishop, 2021a; Edwards, 2022), audiences (Sobande, 2017), platforms (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020; Gillespie, 2010), and industry professionals (Cunningham and Craig, 2019).

This research is located geographically in London, and although the content creators I studied also exist on global platforms, their experiences are limited to the English-speaking industry, predominantly in the UK and USA. At times, literature stemming from the Euro-American context has tended to offer universalising theorisations of platformisation and influencer labour, rather than recognising its situatedness. It is therefore important to clarify that whilst I believe that my conceptualisation of the platformised creative worker has relevance beyond the UK and USA—particularly in other countries where GAMAM[28] are dominant—the ways in which platformisation takes shape in different geographies is dependent on myriad political,

[28] The "Big Five" tech giants: Google, Amazon, Meta, Apple, Microsoft.

economic and sociocultural factors. This divergence is most clearly exemplified in the plentiful literature on the Chinese context, which has a distinct platform environment and *wanghong* economy (Craig, Lin and Cunningham, 2021). This thesis builds predominantly on the existing body of Euro-American literature of platformisation and influencer labour, which has a particular set of theories and conceptual tools. However, I am glad to see a growing interest in diversifying the geographies of theory and decentring the dominance of Western perspectives, as exemplified by the upcoming special issue 'Global Perspectives on Platforms and Cultural Production' in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and the associated conference 'Global Perspectives on Platforms, Labor & Social Reproduction', convened by the Platform Labor project and the Global Digital Cultures initiative at the University of Amsterdam in June 2023.

Due to the open and exploratory nature of ethnographic research, many threads emerged during this project that I was unable to follow to their fullest extent that are deserving of further investigation. Three key avenues for continued research emerged as particularly vital:

(1) *Creator resistance*: This thesis addressed some of the individual tactics that creators employ in attempts to mitigate precarity and resist harms, such as cross-platform labour and retreating into private community crowdfunding spaces. As discussed in this chapter, there is limited literature on grassroots collective action in the influencer industry, and much more is needed, particularly on larger attempts to organise labour and reign in the power of platform companies through trade unions, councils and guilds.

(2) *Algorithmic discrimination and intersectional inequalities*: Research into structural inequalities across intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability in the industry has begun to emerge, to which this thesis contributes, but more is needed, particularly that which provides accounts of creator experiences. Whilst this project addressed these dynamics in some detail, they emerge from a research project designed with a much broader set of questions and concerns. I see this project therefore as providing a strong foundation for future research that seeks to address structural inequalities through a more focussed treatment in terms of participant selection and research questions. Further investigation into algorithmic discrimination is especially

vital, with a focus on how platform architectures function as disciplinary forces for marginalised content creators, and the ways in which they are able, or not, to resist such disciplining.

(3) *Platform co-option*: As argued in the previous section, we have moved into a new phase where platforms are no longer able to frame themselves discursively as neutral vessels for content (Gillespie, 2010), with platform initiatives emerging that seek to tackle inequalities happening on and exacerbated by them. Further research is needed to analyse such initiatives within the broader cultural and commercial-industry context, as an important new avenue for understanding how platforms are operating and representing themselves with regards to inequalities.

Overall, the thesis has argued that platformisation of the Cultural and Creative Industries has significant implications for creative labour and contributes to ongoing debates about the future of work and the impact of technology on contemporary forms of employment. Through an examination of the sociocultural, technological, and commercial factors that shape the work of London-based content creators, I asserted that the *platformised creative worker* marks an intensification of the neoliberal worker-subject, with workers facing heightened conditions of both precarity and inequality in platformised environments. My hope is that this conceptualisation is useful for analyses of the experiences of cultural workers across different industries, and for cross-industry conversations around the nature and conditions of platformised cultural work more broadly. Gill argued in 2010 that for the neoliberal worker-subject, "every interaction is an opportunity for work" to the point where "life is a pitch" (p. 290). As I have explored in this thesis, nowhere is this claim truer than in the case of social media content creators, who are not only subject to the existing cultures of work in the Cultural and Creative Industries, as well as new formations of platformised creative labour, but whose very lives, tastes, relationships, and personalities are the object of their content and targets for potential critique from audiences.

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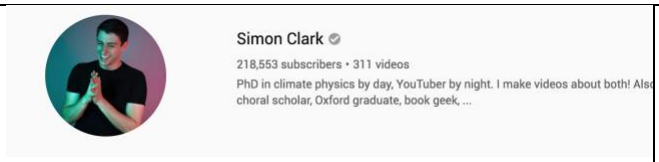
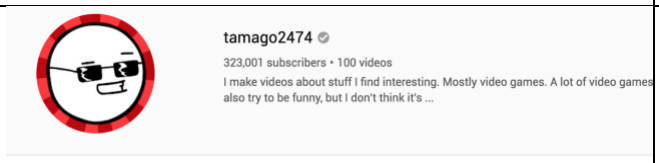
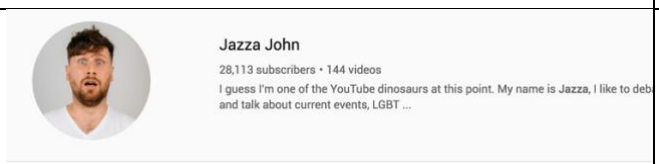
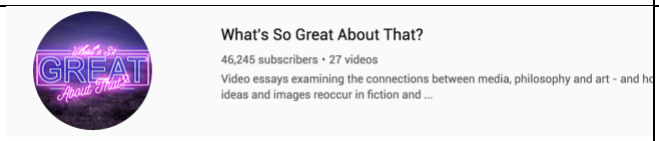
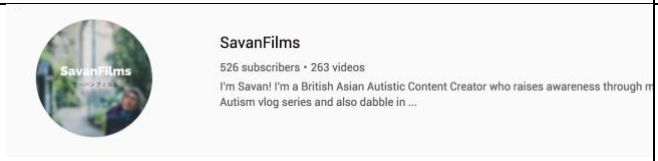
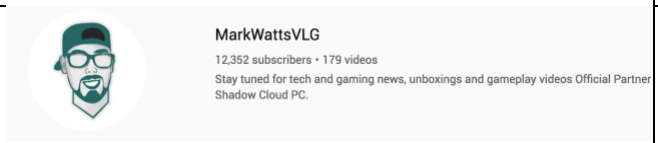
Appendices

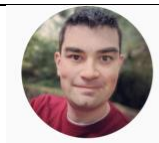
Appendix 1: Key participants list and details

Name	**YouTube channel information at time of interview**	**Info/genre at time of interview**	**Demographic information at time of interview**	**Date of interview**
Anthony D'Angelo	 Anthony D'Angelo 4,242 subscribers • 98 videos exploring contemporary issues in digital media youtubing since '07.	Video essays about creator culture Executive Director of Internet Creators Guild Follower stats at time of interview: - 4000 YouTube subscribers - 1000 Twitter followers - 800 Instagram followers	21, Caucasian, American, trans non-binary, queer	10.7.18
Lucy Moon	 Lucy Moon 306,634 subscribers • 224 videos Lucy Moon is a London-based vlogger who talks about lifestyle, fashion, beauty a women's issues. Lucy Moon candidly ...	Lifestyle, vlogs, fashion, beauty Follower stats at time of interview: - 317,000 YouTube subscribers - 81,700 Twitter followers - 112,000 Instagram followers - 3,800 likes Facebook public page	23, Caucasian, British, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	26.11.18

Simon Clark		Science EduTuber Follower stats at time of interview: - 180,000 YouTube subscribers - 12,000 Twitter followers - 9000 Instagram followers	27, Caucasian, British, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	11.10.18
Simi Adeshina		Animations, gaming Follower stats at time of interview: - 272,000 YouTube subscribers - 5,091 Twitter followers - 3,459 Instagram followers - 4,288 followers on Facebook Watch	Simi Adeshina 19, British Nigerian, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	2.10.18
Jazza John		Video essays and vlogs about LGBTS+ issues, politics and pop culture Follower stats at time of interview: - 25,000 YouTube subscribers - 7000 Twitter followers - 2000 Instagram followers - 1000 likes Facebook public page	29, Caucasian, British, cisgender male, homosexual	20.12.18
Grace Lee		Video essays about media, art and philosophy	Grace Lee 24, Caucasian, British, cisgender	13.2.19

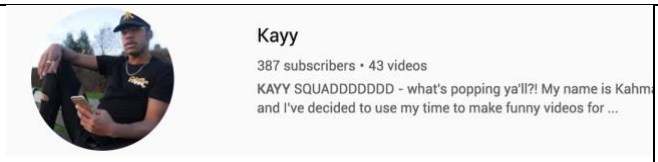
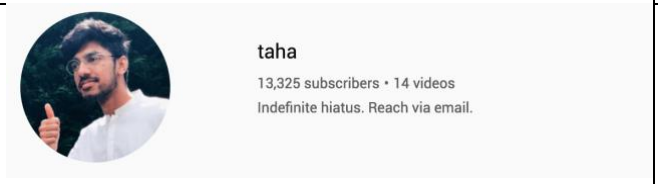
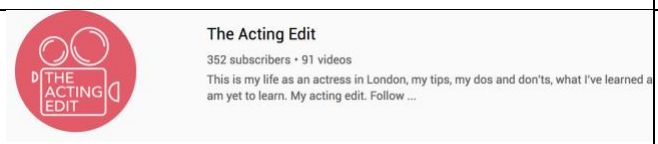
		Follower stats at time of interview: - 30,000 YouTube subscribers - 1,100 Twitter followers - 149 patrons, $323 per creation	female, sexuality unknown	
Eleana Overett		London travel channel: tours, activities and property Founder of the London Small YouTubers organisation Follower stats at time of interview: - 12,000 YouTube subscribers - 950 Twitter followers - 960 Instagram followers	Eleana Overett 29, Caucasian, British, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	21.2.19
Savan Gandecha		Autism-related vlogs and short films Follower stats at time of interview: - 500 YouTube subscribers - 1,200 Twitter followers - 408 Instagram followers	Savan Gandecha 28, British Indian, trans non-binary, queer	6.3.19
Mark Watts		Tech reviews, unboxings and gaming Follower stats at time of interview: - 11,000 YouTube subscribers - 860 Twitter followers	28, Caucasian, British, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	11.3.19

		- 300 Instagram followers		
Jana Hisham	 Jana Hisham 167,280 subscribers • 53 videos My name is Jana and I create a weekly show called Thank You For Sharing, bringin you the latest viral content and analysis of ...	Vlogs and trending challenges. Runs two YouTube channels, one English language (Jana Hisham) and one Arabic language (Jana vlogs) Follower stats at time of interview: - 167,000 YouTube subscribers (English language channel) - 128,000 YouTube subscribers (Arabic language channel) - 47,000 Twitter followers - 13,600 Instagram followers	24, British Saudi, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	16.3.19
Tortor Smith	 Tortor Smith 531 subscribers • 252 videos November 2nd 2018 I challenged myself to create a video or vlog every day for one ye 365 days in a row. I recently reached ...	Runs three YouTube channels: vlogs, stop motion, tarot Follower stats at time of interview: - 532 YouTube subscribers on vlog channel - 485 YouTube subscribers on animation channel (Animatortor) - 1,241 YouTube subscribers on tarot channel	29, Caucasian, British, trans non-binary, queer	21.6.19

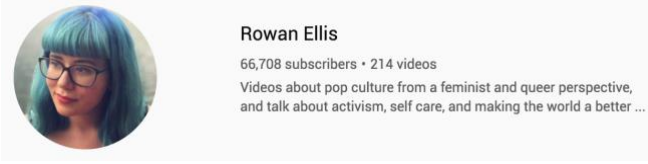
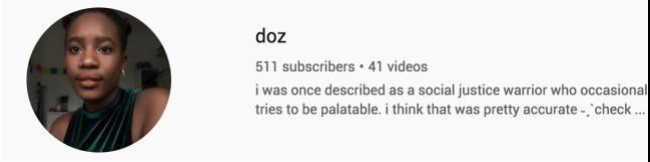
		- 841 Twitter followers - 441 Instagram followers		
Andy Hartley	 Andy Hartley 173 subscribers • 132 videos How many sex positive men are there on YouTube? Videos on Sex Educatio Relationships, Being Yourself, Welfare, and other ...	Sex education Social Media Manager for London Small YouTubers Follower stats at time of interview: - 173 YouTube subscribers - 183 Twitter followers - 153 Instagram followers	34, Caucasian, British, cisgender male, straight	20.6.19
Amandine Flachs	 Amandine Flachs 14 subscribers • 16 videos My name is Amandine Flachs and I am the producer and host of Entrepreneurs Playi Games, a live video podcast featuring ...	Gaming videos with entrepreneurs Follower stats at time of interview: - 24 YouTube subscribers - 8 Twitch followers - 4,301 personal Twitter followers (@AmandineFlachs) - 102 professional Twitter followers (@EntrepreneursPG) - 249 Instagram followers	27, Caucasian French, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	1.7.19
Hannah Witton	 Hannah Witton 535,456 subscribers • 440 videos Hi I'm Hannah :) Welcome to my channel! I make vlogs about sex, relationships ar other stuff! Subscribe for regular videos!	Sex education, lifestyle, vlogs, disability (Hannah has ulcerative colitis and talks about having a stoma, as well as disability as a	27, Caucasian, British, Jewish, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	27.6.19

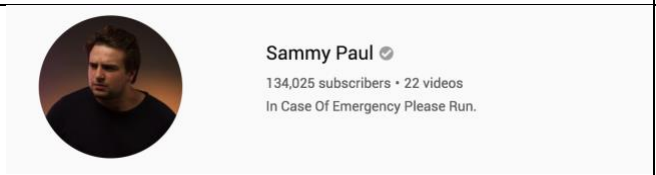
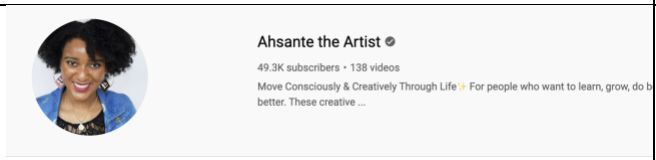
		topic more generally) Follower stats at time of interview: - 543,000 YouTube subscribers (main channel) - 127,000 Twitter followers - 170,000 Insta followers		
Leena Norms	 leena norms 59,258 subscribers • 265 videos Leena. Here for the cake. Frankly.	Video essays, politics, BookTuber, environment, social justice Follower stats at time of interview: - 60,100 YouTube subscribers - 16,700 Twitter followers - 17,300 Instagram followers	29, Caucasian, British, Jewish, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	8.7.19
Ariel Bissett	 Ariel Bissett 150,954 subscribers • 371 videos Hello there, lovely human! :) Let's have some fun while talking about books.. and ot stuff! For business inquiries, please contact ...	BookTuber, house renovations, lifestyle, vlogs Follower stats at time of interview: - 153,000 YouTube subscribers - 38,600 Twitter followers - 52,600 Instagram followers	24, Causasian-Mexican, Canadian, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	2.7.19
Jake Aspey	 Jake Aspey 419 subscribers • 236 videos Youtube is a place where I think people should make videos for themselves and frien so thats what I do. I just so happen to ...	Vlogger, music Founder of We're Not Just Cats Records (YouTube artists)	26, Caucasian, British, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	3.7.19

		Follower stats at time of interview: - 426 YouTube subscribers - 1145 Twitter followers		
Charlie McDonnell	 Charlie McDonnell @charlieissocoollike • 2.12M subscribers	Vlogs, trends, sketches, education, gaming Famous OG YouTuber, first British YouTuber to reach 1 million subscribers in 2011. No longer making YouTube content when I interviewed them, writer and showrunner for Quibi Follower stats at time of interview: - 2.2 million YouTube subscribers - 571,000 Twitter followers - 176,000 Instagram followers	28, Caucasian British, transgender female (came out since our interview), sexuality unknown	23.7.19
Steve Simpson	 Steve Reviews 126,284 subscribers • 44 videos For inquiries please email me at stevereviews2142@gmail.com.	Film and offbeat animation reviews Follower stats at time of interview: - 142k YouTube subscribers - 815 Twitter followers	Steve Simpson 28, Caucasian, British, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	3.8.19

Kahmal Spencer		Vine-style short sketches and challenges, mostly on Facebook and Snapchat. He also did acting and presenting Follower stats at time of interview: - 389 YouTube subscribers - 19,000 Facebook followers - 5,300 Twitter followers - 10,800 Instagram followers	Kahmal Sealey 22, Black British, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	5.8.19
Taha Khan		Sketch/comedy, EduTube Panels Coordinator for SitC (2016-2019) Follower stats at time of interview: - 13,500 YouTube subscribers - 12.2k Twitter followers - 6.1k Instagram followers	Taha Khan 21, Pakistani British, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	7.8.19
Tânia Pais		Tutorials about working as an actor and other videos/vlogs Follower stats at time of interview: - 372 YouTube subs at time of interview - 615 Twitter followers	Tania Pais 34, Caucasian, Portuguese, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	8.8.19

		- 751 Insta followers - 162 Facebook followers		
Participant anonymised		"BreadTube" video essayist: philosophy, politics, gender, culture. Follower stats at time of interview: - 468,000 YouTube subscribers - 96,000 Twitter followers - 4,150 patrons	26, Caucasian British, transgender female (came out since our interview), sexuality unknown	10.8.19
Kit Ashton	 Kit Ashton Musicology 2 videos	Ethnomusicology education (PhD student) Follower stats at time of interview: - 120 YouTube subscribers - 839 Twitter followers	40, Caucasian, British, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	19.8.19
Hannah Snow	 Hannah Snow 12,170 subscribers • 60 videos a happy little accident instagram // @hellohannahsnow twitter // @hannahsnow tiktok @hannah snapchat // @hellohannahsnow ...	Comedy, art, stop motion, DIY crafts, LGBTQ+ Follower stats at time of interview: - 736,000 followers on TikTok - 14,000 YouTube subscribers - 5,300 Twitter followers - 21,700 Instagram followers	27, Caucasian, British, cisgender female, queer	20.8.19

Tom Scott		EduTuber: science, trivia, linguistics Follower stats at time of interview: - 1.8 million YouTube subscribers - 96,000 Twitter followers - 31,900 Instagram followers - 18,000 Facebook followers	34, Caucasian, British, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	21.8.19
Rowan Ellis		Video essays on LGBTQ+ politics and popular culture, representation and history Follower stats at time of interview: - 70,500 YouTube subscribers - 15,600 Twitter followers - 5,800 Instagram followers - 18,000 Facebook followers - 119 patrons	27, Caucasian, British, cisgender female, queer	30.8.19
Dorothy Chirwa		vlogs, social/political issues, poetry, race, LGBTQ+ Follower stats at time of interview: - 508 YouTube subscribers - 530 Twitter followers - 776 Instagram followers	(Dorothy Chirwa) 20, Black British, cisgender female, sexuality unknown	3.9.19

Sammy Paul		Scripted content and music videos: director, producer, writer. Works with many high-profile UK YouTubers Follower stats at time of interview: - 134,000 YouTube subscribers on main channel - 36,000 subscribers on 2nd channel (What I'm Doing Now) - 141,000 Twitter followers - 63 Patrons - 39,000 Instagram followers	Caucasian, British-Algerian, cisgender male, sexuality unknown	17.9.19
Ahsante Bean		Vlogs and video essays about personal growth, productivity, intersectionality, identity and social justice Works as a Multimedia Storytelling Strategist, previously for PBS Digital Studios, now as a freelance consultant Follower stats at time of interview: - 49,500 YouTube subs at time of interview - 2,789 Twitter followers	29, African American, cisgender woman, asexual	10.8.22

		- 52,600 Insta followers - 63 Patrons		

Additional interviewee:

Jo Burford			Not a creator. Head of Creator Solutions at social media marketing company Whalar at time of interview. Used to work as Creator Partner Community Manager at Twitter	10.9.19

Appendix 2: Participant consent form

Media & Communications PhD Research Consent Form

Project Title: An ethnographic study of aspiring and professional YouTube content creators

Researcher: Zoë Glatt

Participant's Statement

I agree that:

- The research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study.
- I understand that my participation will be audio-recorded, and I consent to use of this material as part of the project.
- My name, job title and place of work may be identified in the final report and waive the right to anonymity for the purposes of this research.
- I understand that the project may refer to my YouTube videos or other social media posts in conjunction with the interview transcript, and I consent to use of this material as part of the project.
- The interview transcript may be shared with third party researchers and may be used by others for future research.
- I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researchers involved and withdraw immediately.

Name:

Signature: Date:

Appendix 3: Interview topic guide

Personal history

- Tell me your name and age
- How long have you been posting online, and on YouTube specifically?
    - Tell me about your history posting content online
    - Can you describe what a regular week looks like in your work?
    - How do you define your style or genre of content?

Money/career

- Would you describe yourself as a full-time 'content creator'? if not, would you like to be one?
    - When did you shift from casual content creator to professional?
    - Do you have a manager or agency? When did that start? What difference has it made?
- In what different ways do you make money online? Which platforms/what revenue streams? (Patreon, sponsorships and brand deals, AdSense, other?)
    - Are there some ways to make money that you prefer to others?
- If you do brand deals, how do you decide about what types of brand deals to do?
- Do you find it stressful building a career upon platforms that are unpredictable, and you can't control?
    - Do you do anything to mitigate the danger of a particular platform closing down or performing less well for you?
- How has your content changed since you became (or tried to become) a professional creator?
- Do you feel an allegiance to any particular platform?
    - What, if anything, would encourage you to move away from YouTube?

Platform ecology/culture

- What different platforms do you use as part of your job?
    - What do you post on what platforms (video, pictures, text)?
    - Why do you post across lots of different platforms?
    - How do you decide what platforms to post what types of content to?
    - How do you make decisions about how much time to spend on each platform?
- Are there any platforms that you don't use (as much) because you don't like the culture?
- How do you get ideas for videos (and other content)?
- Do you think about different platforms as being complimentary or competitive?
    - For example, do you move audiences to your different social media profiles? Do you choose one platform over the other because it offers you more?

Metrics/analytics/algorithms

- Do you spend much time thinking about how to optimise your content so that more people see it?
    - If yes, what do you think about? (e.g. changing content, tagging, titles, thumbnails)

- Are you always trying to make content that the most people will see (maybe through clickbait or trends), or do you try to mostly make things that you enjoy, or think are important?
- Do you feel like you have to fit into trends to build an audience?
- Do you look at your channel analytics much?
    - If so, does this data impact the types of content you create?
- Do you spend much time thinking about algorithms? On YouTube, or other platforms as well?
    - How do you know about it and what do you do about it? Trial and error, conversations with other creators, advice from management, algorithm hacking videos?

Audience

- Who are your target audience? Do you think you reach your target audience?
- Do you think you have the same audience across different platforms?
- How much does audience feedback and interaction impact the types of content you make?
    - Where do you interact with your audience(s) the most?
- How do you integrate brand/sponsorship deals into content?
    - Do you think hard about whether your audience will be OK with a brand/sponsorship deal?
    - How does this affect your decisions about paid content?

The future

- What do you hope for the future of your job as a content creator?
- Do you have any predictions about how the industry will change in the next few years?
    - Do you think YouTube will become less powerful as other platforms try to vie for content creators (IGTV and Facebook Watch)?

Jo Burford (social media marketing manager) interview topic guide

- Do you think brands have a powerful role in shaping social media culture?
- Do you think social media influencer have a lot of freedom, or do they have to fit in with brands to sustain viable careers?
- What do you think is different stylistically or culturally about influence/social media marketing than previous types of marketing?
- How do you think social media has changed society?

Appendix 4: List of offline events attended

Event	Date(s)	Location
1. Creators for Change Summit 2018	24th & 25th February 2018	The Oval Space, London
2. VidCon US 2018 + Disney Day	20th-24th June 2018	Anaheim, California
3. Summer in the City 2018	10th-12th August 2018	ExCel Centre, London
4. UNESCO Media and Information Literacy Week (MIL)	25th-27th October 2018	Riga, Latvia
5. London Small YouTubers meeting	19th January 2019	Camden Collective, London
6. VidCon London 2019	14th-17th February 2019	ExCel Centre, London
7. VidCon US 2019	10th-13th July 2019	Anaheim, California
8. London Small YouTubers meeting	3rd August 2019	Camden Collective, London
9. Summer in the City 2019	9th & 10th August 2019	ExCel Centre, London
10. VidCon London 2020	20th-23rd February 2020	ExCel Centre, London
11. Creator Table Talks	25th February 2020	Old Street, London