



The romance of work: Gender and aspirational labour in the digital culture industries

Brooke Erin Duffy

Temple University, USA

Abstract

Despite widespread interest in the changing technologies, economies and politics of creative labour, much of the recent cultural production scholarship overlooks the social positioning of gender. This article draws upon in-depth interviews with 18 participants in highly feminized sites of digital cultural production (e.g. fashion, beauty and retail) to examine how they articulate and derive value from their passionate activities. I argue that the discourses of authenticity, community building and brand devotion that they draw on are symptomatic of a highly gendered, forward-looking and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity that I term 'aspirational labour'. Aspirational labourers pursue productive activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven. Indeed, while a select few may realize their professional goals – namely to get paid *doing what they love* – this worker ideology obscures problematic constructions of gender and class subjectivities.

Keywords

affect, creative industries, consumer culture, cultural production, gender, labour, social media

We're on the cusp of enabling the creative class (bloggers) to finally make a living doing what they love.

– Dino Dogan, Founder of Triberr, Social Media for Bloggers

Corresponding author:

School of Media and Communication, Temple University, 2020 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA.

Email: bduffy@temple.edu

In the wake of widespread transformations in the technologies, economies and politics of the global labour market, discussions about the conditions and possibilities of creative work abound. These discourses range from techno-utopian celebrations of digital media platforms that ostensibly enable ‘anyone’ to become a creative producer (e.g. Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006) to critical perspectives on the role of the neoliberal tenets of individualization and personal choice in fuelling self-branding practices (Gill, 2008; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013). Recent years have also seen the emergence of myriad how-to manuals targeting a new class of aspiring creative workers. With seductive titles like *How I Made Over \$100,000 Online Doing What I Love* and *Citizen You: How Entrepreneurs are Changing the World*, the market is rife with advice on how to secure – or better yet *create* – a job that doesn’t seem like work. Indeed, highly affective terms like ‘passion’ and ‘love’ have become so salient to contemporary labour narratives that some members of the social media community have adopted the maxim ‘DWYL’ (Do What You Love) to describe new employment spaces where pleasure, autonomy and income seemingly coexist. Scholar and cultural critic Miya Tokumitsu even declared DWYL the ‘unofficial work mantra of our time’ (2014: para 3).

Of course, the DWYL ideology is not without its critics; as Tokumitsu convincingly argues, this philosophy obscures inequalities of class, ability and education, while surreptitiously assuring individuals that ‘their labour serves the self and not the marketplace’ (2014: para. 5). This argument neatly maps onto larger critiques of the so-called ‘new economy’, wherein neoliberal ideologies shift risks and responsibilities onto individual citizens (Neff, 2012; Sennett, 2006). It is in this vein that scholars have expressed renewed interest in cultures of production across both ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ media industries (e.g. Deuze, 2007; Duffy, 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Mayer, 2011). Recent interventions into the people, processes and products of creative work can also be traced to the so-called ‘free labour debate’, wherein uncompensated digital media activities – commenting on a TV show review board, creating a YouTube parody or participating in a user-generated ad contest – are conceptualized as digitally enabled forms of creative expression or, alternatively, as free labour exploited by the machinations of capitalism (e.g. Andrejevic, 2008; Fuchs, 2010; Scholz, 2013; Terranova, 2000).

Despite the utility of the aforementioned research in theorizing structures and conditions of work in a digital media economy, much of this scholarship elides important distinctions related to subjectivities of gender. Such oversight is both unfortunate and problematic given that substantial gender disparities continue to plague the major media industries. Importantly, these gender-based inequalities are much more than simply ‘numbers issues’; as Byerly and Ross (2006) explain, female media workers regularly confront masculine work environments (the so-called ‘boys club’), sexual harassment and the normalization of the sexual division of labour. Studies of new media sectors published within the last few years reveal that these hierarchies persist – and may even be exacerbated – with the ascent of more individualized and flexible regimes of work (e.g. Gill, 2002; Gregg, 2008). For instance, Proctor-Thomson contends that policy initiatives that valorize worker diversity in digital culture industries effectively marginalize female employees by reaffirming the ‘narrow and traditionally feminized facilitating roles which support the creativity of others’ – particularly older white men (2013: 147).

These and similar conclusions produce the need for a critical re-examination of the interrelationships between gender, creativity and labour in socially mediated contexts. This article aims to explore this nexus by examining the culture and processes of gendered forms of social media production. Data for this project come from in-depth interviews with 18 participants in highly feminized sites of digital cultural production (e.g. fashion, beauty, retail) in order to understand how amateur producers derive value from their creative experiences and projects. Drawing upon these interviews as well as blogger professionalization resources, I conceptualize a highly gendered, forward-looking and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity that I term ‘aspirational labour’. Aspirational labourers pursue creative activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven. Indeed, while a select few may realize their professional goals – namely to *get paid doing what they love* – this labour ideology obscures problematic constructions of gender and intersectionalities with class. Moreover, despite the rhetoric of creative *production*, the aspirational labour system ensures that female participants remain immersed in the highly feminized *consumption* of branded goods.

In this analysis, I explore three salient features of aspirational labour: narratives of authenticity and realness; the instrumentality of affective relationships; and entrepreneurial brand devotion. These features reaffirm social and historical constructions of gender while tapping into the contemporary ethos of post-feminism, which celebrates individual choice, independence and modes of self-expression rooted in the consumer marketplace (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004). I conclude the article by outlining potential implications of discourses of creative work that are becoming increasingly visible in an era of digitally reconfigured circuits of media production and consumption.

Cultural studies in media work

Against the backdrop of widespread attention to precarious employment conditions, politically charged debates about ‘free’ labour, and much-vaunted industrial discourses of entrepreneurialism and self-branding, creative labour has emerged as quite a trendy research topic. Yet this has not always been the case in the fields of communication and cultural studies. Painting the history of the discipline in admittedly broad strokes, it is quite widely accepted that studies of media consumers (including both ‘effects’ research and reception studies) and texts have far exceeded interest in media industries and their workers. Cultural studies thus exhibited what Levine (2001) aptly described as a ‘bias toward analyses of texts and audiences’. Inquiries into media production processes, Levine continued, offer the potential to generate ‘new insights and heretofore unrecognized connections between media production, media texts, media audiences, and the social contexts within which they circulate’ (2001: 6).

To this end, the last decade has witnessed an exciting revival of production-oriented research across the television, film, publishing, music and advertising industries (e.g. Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Mayer, 2011; Serazio, 2013). Through in-depth interviews and fieldwork, these scholars address how creative work processes are transforming in response to the rapidly evolving technologies, economies and

markets of cultural production. Yet they also acknowledge how changes in the cultural industries are bound up with broader trends in the neoliberal economy, including the individualization of creative work, precarious employment conditions, and widespread revolutions in global policy and culture. Many of these writers contend that studies of media workers can offer insight into larger economic and cultural forces or, as Neff explains, how economic value is ‘communicatively constituted and mediated’ as part of the marketplace’s increasing reliance on the production of ‘symbolic, informational, and aesthetic goods’ (2012: 29).

Recent interest in media work is also a product of digital media theorists seeking to conceptualize new patterns of productivity emerging in the fuzzy space between production and consumption; between labour and leisure; and between professional and amateur. In just the last few years, a medley of half-neologisms – among them, digital labour (Fuchs, 2010; Scholz, 2013), co-creative labour (Banks and Deuze, 2009), passionate labour (Postigo, 2009), hope labour (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), venture labour (Neff, 2012) and playbour (Kücklich, 2005) – has emerged as scholars attempt to understand the implications of new forms of digital and social production. A central line of inquiry connecting these various conceptual dots is whether emergent forms of productivity fit within Marxist-inflected notions of exploitation and alienation – or, instead, if digitally enabled modes of content creation and distribution ‘empower’ audiences.

Although these two streams of research – media industry studies and theorizations of productivity animating the ‘free labour’ debate – help to propel forward our critical understanding of worker subjectivity and the cultures of production in a digital media economy, there remains a glaring oversight: the lack of explicit engagement with gender relations and subjectivities.¹ Foregrounding the role of gender in discourses of creative labour is especially important at the present juncture given the widespread ‘feminization’ of the post-fordist workforce, marked by employment that is ever more ‘insecure, flexible, invisible, and/or poorly paid’ (Negra and Tasker, 2014: 7).²

The gendering of labour

From sociologies of the sexual division of labour (e.g. Acker, 1990) to critiques of the gendered nature of unpaid domestic and emotional labour (e.g. Hochschild, 2003 [1983]), there is a rich tradition of academic literature on gender and work (see McRobbie, 2010, and Jarrett, 2014, for recent reviews). An important strand within this literature (and in feminist politics more broadly) takes up the domestic labour debate, a critique of patriarchal regimes that have rendered invisible ‘women’s work’ – the unpaid labour necessary to maintain the capitalist order. As Gregg summarizes, the ‘problematic division in economic theory [has segregated] the private (unpaid) and public (paid) spheres, implying that work in the home is less “material” than that in the formal workplace’ (2009: 211). Weeks (2011), too, identifies a series of dichotomies that have organized the history of gendered labour: production and reproduction; public and private; and work and family. Yet in examining campaigns for waged housework during the second-wave feminist movement, she critiques ‘feminism’s own idealization of waged work’ (2011: 12, 138–46).

Given various – and at times conflicting – conceptualizations of ‘women’s work’, it is rather curious that much of the recent research on digital cultural industries ignores

subjectivities of gender and femininity. Describing this so-called ‘gender blindness’, McRobbie (2010) criticizes the Italian Operaismo School for subsuming issues of gender under class relations and hierarchies. And, while a handful of studies published by video game scholars discuss the gender of game creators as part of the free ‘digital labour debate’, I agree with Ouellette’s recent assessment that ‘the subject implied by much scholarship on digital labour is male’ (in Andrejevic et al., 2014: 1094).

While this oversight is problematic in and of itself, it is also a missed theoretical opportunity to draw out similarities between traditional conceptions of ‘women’s work’ and forms of value-generating affective labour increasingly visible in the digital economy (Jarrett, 2014). Regarding the latter, I refer to contemporary narratives of self-branding, understood as gendered praxis (though certainly done by both men and women), imbricated with post-feminist sensibilities (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2008). While the work of Banet-Weiser (2012) foregrounds the market forces underpinning the narrative conflation of branding and post-feminist empowerment, scholars like Gill (2002, 2008) and Gregg (2008) indicate just how problematic such narratives can be for employment policies and structures. Though flexible work has been considered a way to emancipate women from patriarchal employment structures (i.e. the problematic narrative that by ‘working from home’, women can combine work and childcare duties), empirical work has revealed that social inequalities and hierarchies in digital workplaces endure (Proctor-Thomson, 2013). Together, such findings suggest a need to re-evaluate the nexus of gender, labour and technologies in sites of creative production that are symptomatic of the Web 2.0 era.

Method

Like recent interventions into media and advertising production cultures published by Deuze (2007), Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), Serazio (2013) and others, I find in-depth interviews to be a productive starting point to answer questions about the experiences and ambitions of creative workers. This article draws on a sample of in-depth interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014 as part of a larger study of gender and social media production. It includes female informants who met two criteria: (1) they were involved in digital/social media production in the feminized fields of fashion, beauty, style or retail;³ and (2) they did not have full-time, long-term positions in these industries; they could thus be conceptualized as amateur or non-professional producers. Three of my participants did not meet the second criterion as they considered blogging part of their full-time career (one self-identified as a ‘full-time freelancer’; the others transitioned from part-time to full-time blogging after finishing their undergraduate degrees). I opted to include them, however, as they provided insightful reflections on the evolution from ‘hobby’ to ‘pro’.⁴

Most of the women were in college or had graduated within the last five years and lived in a large US city (including Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Los Angeles). One-on-one interviews took place in person and, occasionally, over the phone, and followed a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and more than an hour, and topics included participants’ educational/professional backgrounds and training; career interests, aspirations and passions; online and offline interactions with other

social media participants; processes of content creation, distribution and promotion; self-presentation strategies; and relationships to advertisers and other media companies. Although I did not specifically ask questions about participants' socio-economic statuses, class emerged as a sensitizing concept through discussions of technology access, education and professionalization opportunities, among others. As such, I explore class through its intersectionality with gender, an acknowledgement of the 'multidimensional', interacting subjectivities of those occupying marginalized positions (Crenshaw, 1989). This article is also informed by an analysis of fashion and retail professionalization resources, including blogger manuals and daily news publication such as the *Business of Fashion* and *Fashionista.com*.

Aspirational labour

Based upon this data, I argue that many of the activities these young women engage in can be conceptualized as 'aspirational labour', which I define as a forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production. Like individuals performing social roles through aspirational consumption – for instance, purchasing luxury products to present oneself as a member of an elite status – aspirational labourers seek to mark themselves as creative producers who will one day be compensated for their talents – either directly or through employment in the culture industries. To this end, the particular aspirations of my informants varied. Some expressed hope that the strategic pursuit of their creative activities will earn them public recognition – a version of 20th-century Hollywood screen legend Lana Turner's fated discovery at the soda fountain, updated for the Web 2.0 era. As Jess, a recent graduate from a top-ranked communication programme, who had made the transition to 'going pro', explained of her motivation to begin blogging:

Having a blog is a great platform for any other kind of experiment that you want to do in fashion.... It's something creative with my name on it that shows my style, it shows my writing abilities, it shows where I'm from and my tastes and what I like. That gives me a voice to expand on, and puts myself out there and if people are interested and, say I wanted to do TV hosting, or if I wanted to do styling, or try my hand at designing, or something people are interested [in] because they, hopefully, read my blog, they know what I like, and they're interested in either watching, buying ... whatever product or whatever show ... I'm putting out there.

To Jess, her fashion blog represents a way to showcase her talents and passions to the public in a way that opens up various career possibilities. Others see their creative contributions as a springboard to a career in a traditional culture industry. Recent college graduate Ina explained how she was inspired by the success stories of other fashion bloggers who have gone from independent status to sitting in the front row of fashion week. 'For somebody who aspires to be the next Anna Wintour – [US *Vogue's* famed editor-in-chief]', she told me, 'that's the dream.'

Despite such variances in content creators' particular motivations, I have identified three salient features shared by aspirational labourers:

1. authenticity and the celebration of ‘realness’
2. the instrumentality of affective relationships
3. entrepreneurial brand devotion.

As will soon become apparent, these features overlap and intersect in myriad ways. Yet, together, they provide a more nuanced understanding of the creative activities of female content producers and the narratives that help to sustain them.

Authenticity and the celebration of ‘realness’

Discourses of ‘authenticity’ and ‘realness’ have flourished over the last decade, set against the backdrop of newly emergent technologies that have ostensibly upended top-down media hierarchies and enabled consumer-audiences to be active participants in the cultural circuit (Baym and Burnett, 2009). At the same time, commercial media and advertising producers continue to deploy appeals to ordinariness in their promotional campaigns. This uptick in ‘authenticity advertising’ is especially prominent among fashion and beauty retailers that integrate so-called ‘real women’ into their ads as public commitments to female empowerment – or perhaps, more accurately, expressions of commodity feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2012)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the authenticity ideal has provided strong narrative undercurrents for mediated coverage of fashion bloggers and other social media participants who are often presented as apostles of ‘real world’ style (Duffy, 2013). Widespread recognition of fashion blogs that lie outside the western beauty aesthetic – such as plus-size ‘Fat-shion’ bloggers or age 40+ bloggers – has amplified these discourses by implying that the traditional barriers to entry surrounding the so-called glamour industries are more permeable in the digital age. For aspirational labourers, then, the authenticity ideal becomes a productive narrative to embrace. The individuals I interviewed frequently disavowed traditional markers of status by casting themselves as people *just like us*. Pharmaceutical rep and part-time blogger Naomi, for instance, downplayed her physical beauty and model-like body frame in countering the assumption that it was *these attributes* that enabled her to achieve a massive following on her blog. Recalling a newspaper profile of her blog, she explained:

[Reporters] were like: ‘You know, you look like a model so for you it would probably be easy to have followers, and readers, and style, and people want to read what you have’, but I kind of stressed to them [that] you don’t have to be five foot nine and a size two to be successful at fashion blogging.... For people that have a certain size or shape there is a blogger out there for you that does a really good job of dressing themselves and showing how you can have personal style by being different sizes and looking different.

Other bloggers also seemed to draw on themes of ‘realness’ or ‘ordinariness’ to establish themselves as relatable. As Erin described her blog: ‘I think of it as a beauty/lifestyle blog for everyday women.... I purposefully try to focus on either products or styling that is actually accessible to the everyday women.’ She added: ‘I don’t have a personal trainer and a personal chef, and I don’t live this lavish lifestyle.’

Importantly, these widespread appeals to ordinariness were tempered by evidence that many fashion bloggers are not just *regular people* but, rather, have certain attributes, skills or forms of capital that afford them unique access to the cultural circuit. For the most part, the women I interviewed conformed to heteronormative standards of beauty; they were young, thin, and the majority (15 out of 18) were Caucasian.⁵ Class intersectionalities were also discernible; interview participants tended to be well-educated, intelligent and articulate, exhibiting a degree of cultural capital that they could channel into their pursuits and aspirations.

Moreover, by deploying the authenticity mythos, participants downplayed a baseline level of economic capital that is presumably a prerequisite for aspirational labourers hoping to achieve their goals. As the visible enactment of one's personal style, fashion blogs centre on clothing, accessories and beauty products that logically necessitate participation in the consumer marketplace. In addition, aspirants must have access to the requisite technologies for producing and distributing their content: photography equipment, editing software and wireless internet access/smart phones, among others, all of which require a steady stream of funding that is often rationalized as an investment. The significance of access was brought into stark relief by two of my interviewees, neophyte fashion blogger Gillian and college student and part-time style blogger Meghan. Gillian, who considered herself among 'the unfortunate many [to] drop out' of art school, explained of the very recent launch of her blog: 'Actually I wanted to get in [fashion blogging] for a couple years, but I couldn't because I didn't have a computer... I did not have access to that.' Meghan, similarly, said that she started her first blog once she got a DSLR camera, explicating: 'I didn't want to take pictures with a regular point-and-shoot camera because [the images] don't come out very good.' Of course, technologies of production not only require economic capital, but also the leisure time to learn to use them effectively. This explains why some of my informants admitted to hiring web designers and other consultants to support the development and promotion of their site, a significant indicator of class status.

Professionalization also encompasses formal and informal networking opportunities. For some, this came in the form of previous positions in fashion, journalism, design and/or marketing. Indeed, all of the college students and recent graduates (within the last year) I interviewed had majored in public relations, advertising, marketing or a related field. Their professional experience included paid or (much more often) unpaid internships, the latter of which are typically the province of the well-heeled, whose families can sustain their costs of living for as long as they work without remuneration (Perlin, 2011: 160–2). Participants also discussed the impetus to network with others by attending social media conferences, 'blogger meet ups' and even New York Fashion Week. In her how-to book *Fashion 2.0: Blogging Your Way to the Front Row*, Style Coalition Founder and CEO Yuli Ziv writes that the latter is especially important, coaxing: 'Even if you live outside a major city hosting one of the fashion weeks, it's worth making a trip for a few days, as an *investment in your career*' (2011: 107, emphasis added). Rachel, a recent college graduate whose blog focuses on luxury brands, mentioned that she had been to New York City a few times over the last year for branding events; several others regularly attended professional conferences, such as those hosted by Independent Fashion Bloggers or *Lucky* magazine. From these discussions, it becomes apparent that

participation in productive socialization (Wissinger, 2007) or ‘compulsory sociality’ (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2010) – necessary networking where work and non-work time bleed into one another – is not available to everyone. Rather, these forms of networking require sufficient reserves of time and money; conference registration fees alone run several hundred dollars. Reflecting on this, Erin confessed:

I think it would benefit me if I went to some of these blogger conference [but] it’s one of these things when it’s during the day and I can’t take off from my day job and pay money.... It really is kind of nuts ... they’re kind of expensive, some of these things and it’s like *Ugh* [expresses frustration].

In a more direct challenge to widespread appeals to ‘authenticity’, college advertising major Lizzie suggested that the ‘top-tier’ bloggers, in particular, perpetuate unrealistic fantasies about the blogger lifestyle. She explained:

Obviously my life is not all dressing up in designer clothes, and going out to eat for every meal and drinking wine every night, and going to Paris, [but] that’s what these girls are showing you, and you think that that’s attainable in a sense.

Authenticity, then, seems to be a productive myth that enables aspirational labourers to carve out a space at the margins of ‘traditional’ industries and professions, while downplaying their existing social and economic capital.

The instrumentality of affective relationships

Although digital modes of creativity are often articulated as individual expressions of the self – the personal blog that allows one to share their true passions or the creatively inspired Pinterest page – the project of the aspirational labourer also involves building affective relationships with members of one’s community. Importantly, expressions of community, sociality and affect, which are often stereotyped as ‘feminine’ traits, require the management of feelings or what Hochschild (2003 [1983]) identified as the ‘emotional labor’ of service workers. As emotional labourers for the social media age, 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.⁶ The quantification imperative is fuelled by a digital media system wherein advertisers and affiliate networks compensate individuals based upon their potential impact on other members of their social media community, and *bigger* typically translates into *better*. In fact, affiliate marketing programmes provide specific guidelines on the number of readers/comments a blogger needs to monetize her site. *The Blog Inc.* manual recommended that bloggers hoping to attract advertisers achieve ‘a minimum of 1,000 visitors a day or 100,000 page views a month before launching an ad program’ (Cho, 2012: 128).

My informants acknowledged the time and energy necessary to significantly increase one’s social media metrics. Naomi, for instance, explained how commenting is ‘incredibly time consuming ... in order for people to find you, you have to be commenting on

lots of things, you have to be very active with it'. She also acknowledged the work that goes into offline socializing, explaining:

A lot of bloggers have grown in readership through networking through other people. And I know bloggers personally that they were kind of small and they started hanging out with a lot of the girls that were very successful and then they blew up overnight.

While Naomi nods toward the culture of reciprocity that seems to power the blogosphere, Ina explained how she carefully monitors her metrics in order to craft outfit posts that will better appeal to her readers. As she offered,

I use Google BlogSpot, and they have a cool analytics [program] ... you look at that and get a sense of what posts are getting the most traffic. For example, I recently did a post on layering lessons and that was probably my most-read post of all times. That ... tells me what I should [be] doing and what my readers are going to like. And, for instance, if I've done posts on celebrities where my readers don't like it as much, I probably won't do that as much and focus more on my outfits instead.

Such comments reveal how valuable forms of audience feedback are to the projects of aspirational labourers. My interview with Rebecca, a college student majoring in advertising, was especially telling about how the emphasis on metrics can significantly impact the creative process. A Pinterest user with a staggering 3 million plus followers, Rebecca told me that she didn't even realize how many she had until US-based marketing firm Hello Society invited to her to be a paid Pinterest tastemaker, a position she had held for nearly a year at the time of our interview. Rebecca admitted that she pays much more attention to metrics now that they are tied to economic rewards. 'I follow the numbers more closely to see if my numbers are going up or going down and trying to determine what times [of day] work best.' She also disclosed how she has to think more carefully about what she pins – explaining that she didn't want to overdo certain topics or 'use too much repetition because people will un-follow you'.

Nicole, meanwhile, described how she recently rethought the direction of her blog in order to get away from what she saw as a problematic 'obsession' with metrics that deflected attention away from the self-expressive elements. She recalled: '[I was] like, oh my gosh, I have to get this many Twitter followers and this many people on Facebook to like [my site].' Sarah, too, confessed that she gets 'crazy' over metrics. These comments align with studies of traditional media professionals, which indicate how a concern with audience expectations and numbers may cause them to lose touch with their inner 'sense of excellence' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 201). More broadly, this emphasis on quantification suggests how the fashion blogosphere is organized according to a hierarchy of social relations where the number of followers/comments gets coded as success (Duffy, 2014). Certainly blogger codes such as 'top-tier' or 'big-name' reify distinctions based on quantifiable metrics and encourage others to emulate these affective practices. This nexus of gender, sociality and profit making provides the necessary context for a final feature of aspirational labour, entrepreneurial brand devotion.

Entrepreneurial brand devotion

The widespread growth of social media has coincided with an emphasis on ‘self-branding’ as a conscious impression management strategy that deploys ‘cultural meanings and images drawn from narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries’ (Hearn, 2010: 198; see also Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2013). Aspirational labourers understand self-branding practices as imperative to their creative projects as they endeavour to market themselves to (current and potential) audiences and advertisers, while forging a consistent brand identity across social media platforms. Yet an important – and gendered – aspect of the neoliberal self-brand is what I term ‘entrepreneurial brand devotion’, where digital content creators visibly align themselves with certain commercial brands in the hope of riding on their coattails. The term ‘devotion’ is drawn from Campbell’s articulation of the ‘labour of devotion’, which capitalizes on marketers’ assumptions that ‘men loyally consume their favorite brands whereas women actively promote their favorite brands to other women’ (2011: 500). Campbell’s definition draws much needed attention to the industrial construction of gendered consumer subjectivities and, more specifically, the assumption that women are uniquely social and thus more willing to promote branded goods.

Jess provided a useful context for understanding the boon of this exchange system to brands hoping to capitalize on bloggers’ influence:

Bloggers have an undeniable force of power in the industry: they’re driving sales, they’re contributing to campaigns ... people love to follow bloggers because you feel like ... you’re following their story and you feel like you know them and there’s this personal connection.... So I think that’s really the reason why girls have been so drawn to the concept. You know, girls are personable and they like to know each other, and when you feel like you know a blogger and you like her, you like her personality, her writing, her style, you want to wear what she’s wearing and it really does translate into numbers, it really does translate to sales.

Interviewees enacted entrepreneurial brand devotion for companies ranging from Target and L’Oreal to Rachel Zoe and BCBG, each of which compensated them through free products, the promise of ‘exposure’ and, in some cases, a small sum of money. A frequently invoked transaction was that of a sponsor ‘gifting’ a product in exchange for reviewing, styling it or sharing promotional messages with members of their social media community. Rachel provided a first-hand account of how this system works by reflecting on her recent interactions with brand advertisers and publicists:

When [brands] have events around New York or Philadelphia, they will send me an email and send me an invite telling me: ‘We have an event about our new launch, our new product, would you like to come?’ And then we go to the presentation, they give us, like, a premiere, a bit before it’s released out so we can write about it, and try the product, and give our opinions about it.

Later during the interview, Rachel expressed frustration about the lack of remuneration offered to members of the blogging community:

Some of the PR [representatives] don't know that what we're doing is actual work, so they think it's free to ask us ... to write whatever they want us to write.... Some people just send us the email and tell you, 'hey ...'. They don't even put our name [in the email]; they're being so rude. Yeah, and to think they get a lot of money on us actually ...

She offered the example of one 'million-dollar company' that asked her to share promotional content with her readers. When she asked about the issue of compensation, the representative responded 'they don't have a budget for it.... So the one with all the money is like, "Here, do this for free".' In instances such as this, the brand's ostensible payment through *visibility* (rather than through material rewards) ensures that her labour remains *invisible*.

Despite their dreams of earning an income from the provision of branded content, aspirational labourers exhibited concern that they will be accused of what my informants described as 'selling out', an indication that the concern with profit had eclipsed sincere expressions of creativity and brand devotion. One way social media participants were able to reconcile the tension between creativity ('true self-expression') and commerce ('selling out') was by suggesting they weren't promoting a brand 'just for the money' but, instead, because it was a brand they were passionate about. For instance, self-identified 'entrepreneur' Kayleigh explained: 'I only work with companies if I personally shop there or [if] the items are cute, and [I'd] want to share.' Lifestyle blogger Nicole responded similarly that she will only accept advertising 'if the brands coincide with what I'm trying to put out in the world, and if it feels natural'. Of course, reflections on 'selling out' presume a privileged subjectivity as brands are unlikely to work with individuals who lack social and economic capital, as discussed in the preceding sections.

The rise of entrepreneurial brand devotion has – perhaps not surprisingly – dovetailed with initiatives by marketers and media companies to invite fans to participate in highly publicized user-generated content promotions. College senior Ali, a participant in the College Fashionista programme, which appoints student photographers and writers as 'style gurus' for their respective college campuses, explained how important social media promotions are to the programme's advertising partners. After discussing how she was 'gifted' a pair of jeans to style for American Eagle Outfitters, she added:

That's how College Fashionista does a lot of their advertising ... they'll have a giveaway for a pair of jeans because [they're] doing this campaign with American Eagle Outfitters.... They'll get people to 'like' their page through entering this campaign, like 'if you wanna win twenty pairs of jeans you, just have to "like" us and, you know, you're entered'.

Activities such as this involve what I described in the preceding section as affective labour, where participants eagerly promote the brand throughout their online social networks. Yet the value of consumers does not only lie in their labour of devotion, but also in providing specific information and creative contributions that can be harnessed by producers and advertisers – particularly among the lucrative young, female audience.

Discussion and conclusion

While critical discourses of precarity and instability offer a decidedly bleak view of the contemporary labour market, individualist appeals to passion and entrepreneurialism

temporally reroute employment concerns. That is, affective mantras like ‘Do What You Love’ shift workers’ focus from the present to the future, dangling the prospect of a career where labour and leisure harmoniously coexist. This illusory coexistence is well suited to descriptions of work in the culture industries, widely understood as environments where low pay and long hours are a trade-off for creative autonomy. It is against this backdrop that scholars like Neff (2012) and Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) have theorized new modes of productive labour that focus on future-oriented reward systems. While Neff’s (2012) theory of ‘venture labour’ captures employees’ investments of time and resources, Kuehn and Corrigan’s notion of ‘hope labour’ suggests that online media participants carry out work in hopes that ‘future employment opportunities may follow’ (2013: 1). These concepts reveal how the marketplace rationalizes regimes of neoliberal governance that shift risks from central organizations onto individuals. I find these concepts to be incredibly useful for thinking about emergent forms of work in the digital economy; yet, as I have argued, we also need to remove the gender-neutral lens by foregrounding digital labour’s reliance on socially constructed notions of gender – particularly discourses of authenticity, passion and community.

In this article, I have mapped out some of the key features and conditions of aspirational labour, a highly gendered, forward-looking and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity. Aspirational labour involves productive activities that (1) participants believe has the potential to pay off in terms of future economic capital and professional opportunities; and (2) ensures that female content creators remain immersed in the public circulation of commodities. Discourses of ‘aspiration’ – including theories of aspirational consumption, wherein an individual purchases a status object to signal membership in a class to which they do not belong – have traditionally been gendered. Not only is this the case in the realm of consumption, but also production; McRobbie (2010) explains that the ‘aspirations of young women’ have intensified over the last four decades, spurred by new creative career possibilities as well as post-feminist ideologies. Moreover, as DWYL critic Tokumitsu (2014) productively explains, the fields of fashion and media are flush with mostly female employees ‘willing to work for social currency instead of actual wages, all in the name of love’. Unpaid internships are another site of aspirational production marked by stark gender inequalities. In his exposé of exploitative conditions of intern positions across various career sectors, Perlin identifies both gender- and class-based internship injustices, and suggests the former is an upshot of both ‘the fields that women gravitate toward and possibly also because female students have been more accepting of unpaid, unjust situations’ (2011: 27). Aspirational labour thus reifies gendered social hierarchies, reproducing structural conditions that leave women’s work unrecognized and/or under-compensated. Moreover, although these labourers are content *producers*, their work remains inscribed in feminized sites of commodity capitalism (e.g. fashion and beauty), which fails to break down the traditional binary of male producers/female consumers.

These conclusions do not belie the fact that the features of aspirational labour are shot through with contradiction and nuance. The authenticity mythos reaffirms the commercial appeal of ‘real women’ while productively obscuring forms of social and economic capital necessary to pursue production, networking and professionalization opportunities. The investments of time, energy and money exacted of aspiring

pro-bloggers leave the playing field highly uneven. Moreover, those most likely to rise above the din of ordinary people saturating the social media sphere are similar to those who have long occupied these roles; heteronormative standards of beauty and emulation are reaffirmed rather than challenged. Additionally, the emphasis on community and relationship building encourages the strategic deployment of affective relations while reifying constructions of women as social sharers. More surreptitiously, it emphasizes the instrumentality of social relationships as part of a digital reputation economy (Hearn, 2010; Kennedy, 2009). Finally, entrepreneurial brand devotion compels participants to align themselves with corporate sponsors while serving as brand ambassadors who work, not for money, but for potential 'exposure'. By cloaking consumerism in the discourse of visibility, corporate brands capitalize on the energies of these female content creators who sustain the commodity circuit. Taken together, these features of aspirational labour draw on the same market logics of audience building and advertising generation that structure traditional media work. Yet, by veiling amateur activities in the rhetoric of 'newness' and 'possibility', they deflect attention away from more deeply entrenched work realities – including those related to gender and class subjectivities.

In closing, I want to reflect on what the motivations, efforts and investments of aspirational labourers can teach us about more widespread trends in media work in an unfolding digital economy. Certainly, the ascent of Web 2.0 has foregrounded the growing clout of creative enthusiasts whose passion and collaborative spirit seemingly trump traditional markers of expertise. Yet a growing number of these amateur creatives believe their reserves of time, energy and capital will pay off as they 'get discovered', make a living from their passion projects or get hired into a traditional creative industry. Certainly, the same manic rhetoric of 'getting discovered' has fuelled the vast system of unpaid internships, freelance work and user-generated media content. So, *does aspirational labour pay off?* In a handful of cases, these aspirational activities *do* provide labourers with economic and social capital. The success stories of individuals who have deployed their social media fame to gain entrée into the fashion, photography or publishing circuits reaffirm the possible rewards of aspirational labour.

Yet these tales of achievement should not obscure the practical realities of aspirational work. In the case of fashion blogging, only a handful of individuals have been able to realize their dreams of 'going pro'. Even those who have attracted advertisers to their sites earn what Erin called 'almost nothing'. In a study of the political economies of blogging, Chia (2012) noted, 'despite the rousing assurances from guidebooks that anyone can be a pro-blogger, in reality, most blogs languish in digital obscurity'. We might conclude that aspirational labour doesn't pay off – if the benchmark is merely financial compensation. But aspirational labour has succeeded in one important way; it has romanticized work in a moment when its conditions and affordances are ever more precarious, unstable, flexible – and *unromantic*.

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Notes

1. There are some noteworthy exceptions including Mayer's (2011) work on below-the-line media producers, as well as work by Gill (2002, 2008), Gregg (2008) and Proctor-Thomson (2013) on new media industries.
2. Weeks, too, makes the useful claim that feminists' 'insights into the conditions of women's labor under Fordism will prove to be more widely applicable to the forms of work typical of post-Fordist economies' (2011: 25).
3. This subset of interview participants includes fashion and lifestyle bloggers (13), participants in college fashion networking sites and promotions (4); and a paid Pinterest tastemaker (1). Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
4. Participants were recruited through various social media sites as well as by sending direct email messages to individuals who were part of blogger communities and network; a snow-ball sampling method was used to recruit additional participants from the initial round of informants.
5. Informants were Caucasian (15); Asian American (2); and African American (1).
6. I refer here to the imperative to create and maintain social relationships, much like the affective labour performed by models in Wissinger's study that included 'the production of relationships' (2007: 253–4). See Gregg (2009) for a discussion of 'affective labor' specific to culture industries.

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Author biography

Brooke Erin Duffy, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the School of Media and Communication at Temple University (USA). Her research explores the changing nature of creative labour in the digital era, with a particular focus on gendered media forms and production cultures. Her first monograph, *Remake, Remodel: Women's Magazines in the Digital Age*, was published in 2013.