

BEAUTY, BRAINS, AND BOLDNESS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE
ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCER-EDUTAINER JACKIE AINA'S
"UNPOPULAR OPINIONS"

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ABSTRACT

Jackie Aina, a popular Nigerian American beauty vlogger and influencer-educator, has received attention for her candid stances on the beauty, fashion, and social media industries, along with her outspokenness about social justice issues. Notably, several of the videos on her YouTube channel contain “Unpopular Opinions” in their titles. In these videos, Aina conducts makeup tutorials while voicing viewpoints that she deems controversial. This thesis uses Aina’s “Unpopular Opinions” videos as a case study of Black women influencer-educators’ use of critical discourse in their content. It utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) with elements of multimodality and other critical disciplines such as critical race theory and feminist studies to examine how Black women vloggers and influencer-educators balance their dual responsibilities as influencers and educational entertainers.

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CHAPTERS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

YouTube, one of the web's most active websites (Alexa, 2020), allows users to express themselves through videos and virtual community-building features. Video bloggers or "vloggers" use the platform to share their thoughts, opinions, and information with their audiences, including many Black women vloggers who have gained followings for their unique perspectives about world events. Black women vloggers often provide informal education to viewers, using both anecdotal and factual information about various topics, situating their content among what is broadly known as "educational entertainment" on the platform (Sobande, 2017; López-Carril, Añó, & González-Serrano, 2020).

According to social media industry experts, few content creators gain enough viewership and subsequent advertisement revenue and/or sponsorships that they can monetize their talents (Lieber, 2018). Jackie Aina is one of the most well-known of Black women vloggers with a high reach (more than 3.5 million subscribers on YouTube as of this writing) and is known for her makeup tutorials, although she also vlogs about fashion and her day-to-day life. Aina has constantly received attention for her bold stances on the beauty, fashion, and social media industries, along with her outspokenness about social justice issues (Payne, 2018). Notably, several of the videos on her YouTube channel contain "Unpopular Opinions" in their titles. In these videos, Aina conducts makeup tutorials while voicing viewpoints that she deems controversial.

This thesis asserts that the digital critical discourse that Black women content creators and influencers employ in their educational entertainment is valuable in examining how critical discourse interacts with hegemonic interests like influencer deals. In this thesis, the descriptor "content creator" is used as a catch-all term to describe someone who creates content on social media, regardless of whether they receive compensation for that work. The descriptor "influencer" is used when that creator receives compensation as a result of their online content creation: even further, the term "influencer-edutainer" describes a genre of influencer who incorporates educational entertainment — also known as "edutainment" (Johnson & McElroy, 2010) into their content. Because Black women influencer-edutainers bring their experiences to the forefront visibly and discursively, their visibility is a representative presence that Black people, particularly Black women, may use as an example of how to both learn from and express ideas in digital spaces. Using Aina as a case study, this thesis explores how Black women influencer-edutainers perform a multitude of roles for their audiences: storyteller, educator, entertainer, and, unavoidably, endorser. The multifaceted responsibilities of influencer-edutainers are more complex, and that is why it is important to consider how financial and educational interests intersect. Such an intersection is especially timely to examine in scholarship as both educational entertainment and influencer marketing continue to occur in digital spaces.

This thesis uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1985; van Dijk, 1993) with elements of multimodality (Machin, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2013; Brock, 2018; Brock, 2020) to analyze how Aina uses language and audiovisual techniques while conducting beauty tutorials in her vlogs to express her critical opinions on topics that

primarily pertain to the beauty, fashion, and social media industries. The thesis further utilizes additional critical disciplines such as feminist studies (hooks, 2000; Lazar, 2007; Duffy, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015) and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) to highlight some of the underrepresented and critical outlooks that Black women share with others using social media, especially YouTube.

Aina's opinions hold weight for the social media users who view and engage with her content. Because her opinions about particular companies and practices within the beauty, fashion, and social media industries are well-informed by her profession and status as an influencer, her contributions to online discourse about these industries can have consequences that extend outside of digital spaces, a historically unprecedented position to be in as a Black woman.

Aina has made a name for herself by using humor and outspokenness to bolster her beauty tutorial and lifestyle vlogging commentary. When she started her YouTube channel in 2009, she has said she was aiming to use it as an outlet to free herself of burdensome stress and a way to find a supportive community (Jackson, 2019). She started as an independent creator who relied on her small YouTube community to not only support the development of her channel but also to give her motivation to keep vlogging and working on both her makeup and video production skills.

Aina also occupies several intersections – influencer-edutainer, woman, Black – that contribute to the intersectionality of her approach to self-expression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). She is the child of a Nigerian father who emigrated to the United States and an African American mother (Kwarteng, 2021), has made it clear that she “advocates for viewers with skin tones like her own” in her work (Jackson, 2019). In particular,

Aina's role as an influencer-entertainer requires her to make herself distinctive in an oversaturated pool of YouTube content creators. The novelty of her personal story and identity — along with her humor and generally well-received personality — makes her a distinctive vlogger on YouTube.

Even further, she is known for her outspokenness amidst a YouTube community that is known for racial controversies (Payne, 2018). Several beauty vloggers like Laura Lee and Gabriel Zamora have come under criticism from audiences and outsiders alike (Payne, 2018), and Aina has even spoken out against some of her fellow vloggers for their ignorance, intolerance, and bigotry (Jean-Francois, 2017). The most prominent example was her dispute with YouTube megastar Jeffree Star, who she called out for his public and repeated offensive and racist language. Eventually, she found that his vitriol was turned on her, and he allegedly called her a “gorilla” and made other racially charged insinuations (Payne, 2018). In non-digital spaces such as academia, Black women are often burdened with tackling similar emotional labor to co-exist with their non-Black and/or non-women peers (hooks, 2000).

Aina has also collaborated with others to make her displeasure with the practices of her affiliated industries known. For example, Aina was a vocal supporter of the “Pull Up or Shut Up” campaign, created by UOMA Beauty founder Sharon Chuter. The social media challenge, launched on June 3, 2020 in the midst of anti-racism and anti-police brutality protests in the summer of 2020, aimed to make brands who posted messages of support or solidarity to the Black community reveal their economic support of Black people. Chuter requested that the brands make information about the number of Black employees in their corporate and executive levels public information. The campaign also

called on consumers to abstain from purchasing from the brands for 72 hours until they fulfilled the request (Krause, 2020a).

As discussed in this thesis' literature review, Aina's outspokenness has drawn parallels to the "angry Black woman" trope that categorizes any Black woman who dares to vocalize their opinion as a nuisance and more negatively, a threat (Ferguson, 2019). However, Aina has continued standing up for herself and others by strategically incorporating critical discursive practices into her videos (Ferguson, 2019).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dominant Ideologies

Social media have created a convergent landscape where social hierarchies are replicated but also blend more seamlessly (Jenkins, 2006) given the lack of physical barriers to expression that are found in non-digital spaces (even as algorithmic and censorship barriers exist). Therefore, influencer-edutainers like Aina engage with ideology through their discourse daily. Fairclough (1985) discusses how ideology and discourse are combined to serve the needs of dominant institutions. While the definition of ideology is often contested, it is generally thought to be the expression of a worldview with specific goals or aims in mind, especially when the worldview is steeped in privilege and depends on the subjugation of marginalized groups (Fairclough, 1985; Mills, 2005). As a common means of communication, languages and discourses are the foundation of ideologies and can spread them without the speaker knowing that such an exchange is taking place. Fairclough labels this phenomenon ideological-discursive formations (IDFs). The normalization of a dominant IDF in language is what Fairclough calls “naturalization”, which is achieved when non-dominant entities are not aware that their discursive practices are in many ways representative of the interests of the dominant IDF. A rejection of naturalization can only happen when a subject is aware and most likely invested in the subversion of the dominant IDF(s) at play in their discursive practices (Fairclough, 1985).

Much to Fairclough’s point, van Dijk (1993) explores how dominant institutions are also hyper-aware of language as a tool of dominance and often employ it. Because

CDA functions from examining the systems of power described above, it is important to note in this literature review. The basis of CDA is focused mainly on studying and critiquing “pressing social issues” rather than contributing to various schools of thought or furthering theories (p. 252). This means that when CDA is used in research, special attention must be paid to all the ways that the discourse under examination is influencing the social issue or institution under examination. Additionally, critical discourse theorists must take “an explicit sociopolitical stance” (p. 252) in their work to critique the systems of power at play in the discourse they choose to study.

Much like the process of “naturalization” described by Fairclough, van Dijk (1993) takes a sociocognitive approach to CDA. Firstly, he examines how the dominance is established through various types of discourse such as talk and text and secondly, he describes how the dominance is enacted in people’s minds without them being necessarily aware of that dominance occurring. When those with the means to control mass media like broadcasts, advertisements, and written news are crafted with an ideological agenda in mind, it is easier to establish and maintain dominance. In particular, van Dijk relies on the concept of hegemony as described by Gramsci [or, “hegemony” as fully as Gramsci could describe it given his circumstances as a political prisoner (Hall, 1986; Ives, 2004, p. 65)] to provide context into how ideas can become reproduced through the discourse that is performed by those who are not a part of a dominant institution. Gramsci’s hegemonic theory posits that those who are under the influence of dominance come to a state of acceptance regarding the ideologies that dominant forces use to control others, and thus reproduce such ideologies in their day-to-day lives (van Dijk, 1993, p. 255). This allows the dominant ideologies to become so omnipresent that

they are seen as common sense, with institutions and individuals presenting such ideas as if there are not any feasible alternatives.

Black Culture in Digital Spaces

Because of discrimination and systemic barriers, Black people as a demographic have not reaped the supposed benefits of dominant ideologies because those ideologies are not designed with their needs in mind. So what happens when someone who is not responsible for dominant ideologies seemingly rejects such hegemonic thought? The language Aina uses in her videos reflects her desire to amplify the voices of people who experience the world in similar ways to herself. In fact, it mirrors the digital praxis that many other Black people engage in as self-expression. Brock (2020) filters technoculture through the concept of the “libidinal economy”, originally developed by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1974 book *Libidinal Economy*. Brock’s stance argues that libidinal energy (or excess, passionate energy that can be applied to interactions across a number of systems) as the driving force behind both capitalist and informational exchange (pp. 31-32). With the libidinal economy as the overarching concept, Brock organizes Black digital praxis into three frameworks: ratchetry, racism, and respectability. Aina’s videos are evidence of all three in action. Brock views the first two frameworks as inextricable from one another due to ratchetry being defined as the rejection of whiteness and its expected behaviors, what Brock describes as “indicative of agency” (129) in such users’ digital praxis. Therefore, racism finds a scapegoat in ratchetry and is an inescapable force that is interwoven in the behaviors of any Black digital user who embraces ratchetry. Meanwhile, “racism-as-frame” allows Black digital practitioners to operate “hand in hand

with ratchet digital practices to call out racial and social microaggressions not only through catharsis but also through sensuality and humor” (p. 153-154).

Aina’s work can be considered a form of performative ratchetry. In addition to her public desire not to be considered an angry Black woman, she has spoken up against the ways that people could possibly negate her accomplishments because of her behavior in her videos and the way she presents her content (Ferguson, 2019). Although Aina willingly participates in ratchetry, she also recognizes that calculated tactics aid in allowing her message to be better received by audiences:

I strongly believe that because I’m black and because I’m dark-skinned, there’s certain ways that I have to communicate in order for it to be effective...If I stand on a pedestal and yell at everyone about how angry I am about being ignored . . . people don’t want to listen. It becomes the angry black woman trope. But if I have bullet points instead of ranting and find something to reel them in, then I’m making the message a bit more receivable. (Ferguson, 2019)

Such a technique can be viewed as a related idea to that of respectability, which is Brock’s third framework. Respectability is defined by Brock as a primarily “dogmatic” approach (p. 172) to Black digital praxis that celebrates values that fall in line with whiteness. Much like the “pick yourself up by the bootstraps” narrative that is preached to the underdogs of American society, respectability praxis emphasizes the importance of economic and social capital to uplift Black people and move them up the economic and social ladder that was constructed by white people (Brock, 2020). Similar to the sentiment Aina explores in her statement above, there are certain rules that Black public figures tend to abide by — including their online presentation — that allow them to maintain their status as a Black public figure in spaces that primarily celebrate contributions and perspectives of white public figures. However, Aina’s (ratchet) humor and makeup tutorials to soften the blows of her commentary on racism. This shows that

while respectability is a prevalent framework within Black digital praxis, it does not always manifest itself heavy-handedly.

Taking on the frameworks would not be possible without an acute awareness of the double consciousness that one must exhibit as a Black person who operates in white spaces. Brock leans on DuBois' famous concept [what the former describes as the latter's "canonical formulation of the interweaving strands of Black embodiment and American identity" (p. 7)] for these frameworks to emphasize that they while they would be different without "white racial ideology and neoliberal capitalism" (2020, p. 12), the frameworks primarily draw on "expressions of joy and pain in everyday life in American racial ideology, which are articulated as cultural critiques and enacted online" (2020, p. 13).

Aina aims to reflect a more accurate version of those like her. Hall's (1997) theory of "representation" defines it as media creators assigning meaning to what they cover rather than those events having any inherent meaning. Aina's discursive choices is evidence of this interpretation of representation: for example, when she expresses that some of the actions of companies in the beauty, fashion, and social media industries are racist or too economically motivated, she assigns those companies and industries with those meanings when she presents it through her channel to her audience. Hall goes even further than representation in his iteration of reception theory, which he describes as the encoding (assigning meaning to events) and decoding (the audience taking away various meanings from the encoded content) model of communication. In Aina's case, it is possible to discern that she encodes her discourse with meaning and the decoding by her devoted audience takes on what Hall calls a dominant viewing (1973/2018). On the other

hand, if other viewers recognize her discursive coding and reject her message, they are participating in oppositional decoding (1973/2018).

Multimodality in Black Digital Content

Aina achieves her version of discursive representation through several means: in other words, she employs multimodality. In linguistics, the term “multimodality” generally considers how various semiotic devices, linguistic and non-linguistic, interact to create holistic meanings that cannot be realized by solely examining traditional linguistic modes like written and spoken text. van Leeuwen (2013) summarizes the benefit of employing multimodality in critical discourse studies by suggesting that critical discourse studies, which must be grounded in linguistics, should also take into account the additional elements of discourse that are not language-based because those methods of communication can lead to the analysis of various kinds of media like photographs and advertisements (p. 2). Machin (2013) insists that it is past due time to make multimodality in critical discourse studies a more widespread practice, saying that “Different semiotic resources allow certain qualities to be glossed over and others communicated more specifically” (p. 351). This is a primary justification of the importance of multimodality in critical discourse studies because it allows for a fluidity of what is considered meaning-making and significant in linguistics.

It is common for multimodality to manifest in digital spaces. For example, O’Halloran, et. al (2011) acknowledge the impact of multimodality on software, saying "Digital software is a semiotic technology: with it, we find new ways to conduct semiotic research, create semiotics discourse and advance knowledge" (p.123). Similarly, it is clear that vloggers see the value in a multimodal approach because, although they could

have chosen other mediums to share their content, they chose to create videos that incorporate various visual and audio elements. This is particularly important for beauty vloggers as the nature of their content relies on visual presentation of their tutorials and the use of verbal (or written, if viewing closed captions) instructions that guide viewers through their tutorials' steps. Choice of colors, images, gestures, (Machin, 2013) and a host of other concerns are communicative and editing techniques that are up for consideration in multimodal CDA and can play an important role in not only how vloggers' discourse is interpreted but also in the reputation and reputation of vloggers themselves (Marôpo, Jorge & Tomaz, 2020).

Like other vloggers, Aina considers how she can achieve a balance that makes her videos stand out from other content creators' while also maintaining an approachable, relatable and familiar editing and conversational style. Vloggers like Aina who embrace their online community and portray themselves as having extroverted traits in their videos tend to have a larger viewership (Aran, Biel, & Gatica-Perez, 2014, p. 213). Aina utilizes vlogging technology to not only convey her ideas, but to have an outlet to express her outgoing personality while building community.

Brock (2018) developed critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA), a methodology that specifically considers how technology and culture intersect in digital discourse, and defines the analysis as studying "how actors shape technologies and themselves in response to the technologies they use; these technologies in turn are shaped by those who design and market them" (p. 1019). By incorporating technology studies and critical race theory (CRT) [discussed below] into CTDA, the analysis becomes more considerate of the ways that new and developing technologies affect how participants in

online discourse both bring their non-digital experiences into their digital praxis and how they shape their online discourse. In reverse, online users are molded by the design of their information and communications technology (ICT) of choice, which ultimately affects their behavior while using the ICT (p. 1025). Such an approach not only embraces the idea of multimodality in CDA but it also considers the often unexamined relationship between those who create discourse and those who design apparatuses to foster discourse. While CDA looks at how ideologies do or do not manifest in discourse, CTDA goes even further by determining how such ideologies engage with the ICTs that are used to spread the discourse and potentially its ideologies. As such, Brock determines that “a WordPress blog will mediate discourse differently than YouTube comments or Tumblr notes, and as such should be noted in the analysis” (p. 1025).

Critical Race Theory

Outside of CTDA, other contemporary instances of CDA have expanded to incorporate social and technological theories. Bhatia (2020) explains how YouTube beauty vlogger Kaushal reshapes popular narratives about Indian people, especially those who emigrated to another area like Kaushal’s family did to the United Kingdom. In her videos, Kaushal uses different elements of her identity — social media influencer, British-Indian, woman — and intersperses terms, phrases, and concepts that would be more familiar to those who also share some of the same intersections as she does. Although she does not often take a critical stance on dominant institutions, she does tend to intentionally craft her language to show a “denaturalization” of dominant IDFs. This allows her to construct a holistic identity that not only feels true to herself but also that

makes her somebody who her audience can trust with beauty expertise and as a person (Bhatia, 2020).

Like the identity-construction that Kaushal exhibits in her vlogging, CRT examines how race and power interplay, starting from the ground up. It is important to look at the foundations of how race and power are intertwined and how institutions have developed as a result because those processes help explain the way these institutions are still affected by those events and decisions today. Although CRT has its basis in law studies, it has grown into an interdisciplinary subject that has affected the way other disciplines approach racial differences within their studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It is important to highlight the contributions and utilize the strategies of CRT in critical discourse analyses because the theory goes hand in hand with other critical theories such as feminist studies [discussed below] that also take a hard look at how institutions negotiate, gain, and maintain their dominance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In turn, there are many ways in which race plays a role in how individuals relate to power and how they may engage with power, including choices in their discursive practices.

One of the groundbreaking theories associated with CRT is interest convergence, theorized by Derrick Bell, one of the founders of the movement and the first Black professor at Harvard University Law School. Interest convergence posits that any changes that are in favor of marginalized groups come about only because there was a vested interest in those changes by dominant institutions — in particular, elite whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 22). In a law studies context, Bell used the landmark school segregation case *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) to explain the historical happenings that occurred in tandem with the verdict of the case, which ruled in favor of

the plaintiff. Not only did the United States want to avoid racial unrest that could result from Black soldiers returning home to segregation after serving just as honorably as white soldiers in the Korean War and World War II, but it also wanted to present a cleaner image of the country while it engaged in the Cold War (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 23).

The rise of social media campaigns and movements have also proven the validity of interest convergence as a significant factor in political landscapes. The Black Lives Matter organization was launched by three Black women activists and its subsequent movement took social media by storm (Roberts, 2018). While there are still systemic changes that activists are pushing for — as evidenced by the continued protests against systemic racism and police brutality — the shift in accountability that has occurred has been significant, affecting the activism of people in societies around the world and the subsequent changes in policy that follow (NPR Staff, 2016). There was even a measurable uptick in businesses engaging with the movement through discourse: after the anti-police brutality protests that were sparked by the police killing of George Floyd, NBC News reported figures from a report published by Kivvit, a strategic communications and public affairs firm, that seemed unsurprising through the lens of interest convergence:

At least 62 Fortune 500 companies posted about Black Lives Matter on Facebook in the wake of the summer's protests. And BLM Facebook posts by popular brands like Nordstrom, Ben & Jerry's and others saw more engagement than usual posts, according to the report. Before the summer's protests, just two Fortune 500 companies had posted about the movement, the report said. (Adams, 2020).

In non-legal contexts like beauty, fashion, and social media businesses, many brands have seen how advantageous it is to be on the “right side of history” in terms of racial and

social justice. Aina has admittedly benefited from brands deeming her a new “it” girl who is representative of Black women, particularly dark-skinned Black women. However, falling in line with interest convergence, she has recognized the tokenism often associated in the ascension of Black influencers and strongly disagrees with it (Diaz, 2019).

Black Women Influencer-Edutainers and their Work

Black women influencer-edutainers are hybrids of influencers and edutainers who also consider their intersectional identities as Black women in their content. They use their platforms to present their original content in their particular field of specialization while incorporating their economic interests, such as their sponsorships from brands they partner with, so that they can generate revenue. They take care to present any of the information they include in their content in an accessible way so as to appeal to anyone who is interested in the topic(s) they are examining. Johnson and McElroy (2010) contend that traditional educators like teachers can also be edutainers. The role of such a teacher is similar to that of influencers who are conducting educational entertainment online: “the Edutainer concept presents methodologies for teachers to thrive, enjoy, and feel empowered...” (p. 5); however, the traditional classroom does allow more flexibility to reach those who are learning rather than influencers whose work often reaches a larger scale than teachers [“...while producing a learning environment where students are engaged, responsible, and successful in ‘owning’ their own learning” (p. 5)].

Interestingly, Aina has balanced her role as a Black woman influencer-edutainer while critiquing the industries she involves herself with. She readily discusses her issues with various companies that are involved in influencer marketing. Her call outs are done

both as an individual and as a part of movements or campaigns. During the anti-police brutality and social justice protests in the summer of 2020, she took to Instagram and used the Story option to talk about the silence from fast fashion brands regarding the issues being amplified during the protests:

As we know, there are a lot of brands who love capitalizing on black culture, black music, black aesthetic, but are dead silent when it comes to talking about black issues and black struggles in our community...So just as much as y'all love hanging out with Ty Dolla \$ign, and Saweetie, and Blac Chyna, can y'all at least say something when people are being brutally murdered by cops? Donate to the families affected by this stuff? (Krause, 2020b)

Aina proceeded to tag fashion brands Fashion Nova, PrettyLittleThing, and Revolve in the stories, specifically because they are influenced by Black culture and aesthetics (see *Fashion Industry* in the below analysis section) (Krause, 2020b).

Similarly, when she indicated her support of the “Pull Up or Shut Up” campaign shortly after calling out the fashion brands on her Instagram story, she recognized that brands were using the volatile political climate surrounding the anti-police brutality protests to gain support from their socially conscious and Black customers. In a prepared statement prepared by the campaign (with original ad libs by Aina, noted below in parenthesis) that she read in a video on her Instagram account, she said the following about the content that the brands posted to have the acknowledge the protests:

Dear brands and corporations: Thank you for your public statements of support for the black community (but y'all ain't done yet). Be conscious that to ignore the role you have played and continue to play in depriving black people access to economic participation, demonstrates a lack of genuine desire for lasting change. (Aina, 2020)

Aina's participation in the campaign and her willingness to read the statement on her Instagram page indicates her awareness of how companies in the beauty, fashion, and social media industries can use the emotions and circumstances of Black people and other

marginalized groups as a marketing ploy to sell their products. While many beauty brands did participate in the campaign and vowed to make changes (Louzado, 2020), such actions would not have likely occurred had it not been in their best interests to make that information known.

Influencer-Edutainers and Feminism

Feminist studies scholars have also explored the ways that business interests converge with social movements like feminism. Lazar (2007) uses what she calls feminist critical discourse analysis, a theoretical perspective that challenges gendered messages found in discourse (p. 142). She examines how institutions like the advertising industry twist feminist theory and ideas into seemingly empowering campaigns that, in reality, do not promote empowerment at all. Lazar analyzes two advertising campaigns from Unisense Slimming Centre, an Asian company, and Elizabeth Arden, a global beauty brand, that lauded women's sexuality as a means of empowerment. The embrace of sexuality as power was a narrative that was often purported to be a part of third-wave feminism and that do not value the "personal as political" (Lazar, 2007, p. 160), which posits that personal issues need political solutions. Lazar finds that the sexual themes in the advertisements may denote a particular power that women have over men that can be harnessed to their advantage, the campaigns end up reproducing gender stereotypes that promote power as dominance, which is not much different than gendered advertising that places men in positions of power (p. 159). In this way, brands are creating the narratives that they want their potential customers to appreciate and are falling in line with hegemonic practices that allow gendered stereotypes to flourish.

Independent creators also see the advantages of connecting to their customers using a relatability approach. Duffy and Hund (2015) examine the values of femininity explored through a consumer-focused lens and found in the business models of female fashion bloggers. Much of the digital praxis of female bloggers is a celebration of the individual, to the point where self-branding is a constant reality for the bloggers. However, this ultimately serves the purpose of allowing consumers to feel closer to their favorite bloggers. Duffy and Hund reason that bloggers use specific techniques, especially those that boast their reputations as “authentic”, that give them the illusion of “having it all”, a far-fetched dream that even they are not routinely achieving without significant labor and time commitments (2015).

As noted earlier, the development of feminism as an organized movement and practice was crucial to the formation of critical studies. hooks (2000), maintains that although white women with substantial socioeconomic privilege claimed leadership of the movement, feminism as we know it was wrought from the work of a large collection of women with differing socioeconomic, racial, and sexual backgrounds and identities. When it began, the movement as it was intended only accepted those who critiqued themselves as individuals and made themselves hyper-aware of the internalized sexist ideas they carried within them. Even further, as those within the feminist movement fought the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. 4), there was an internal battle being waged within the movement: for feminism to actualize into the movement it was meant to be, women had to critique themselves to ensure that they were not reproducing the same values as those who adhered to the patriarchal system that oppressed all of them (2000). hooks’ observations about the critical thought that had to be applied to the

movement are very similar to the many ways that critique can take place when studying institutions and individuals in academic settings, although she notes that even academia subscribes to socioeconomic, race, and sex discrimination which makes true critique difficult.

Feminist studies also uncover the ways that individuals and social groups can wield language. Remnants of sexism are present in the language of today but the reclamation of traditionally derogatory words such as “bitch” toward females and femme-identifying people shows that it is crucial to look at discourse as a means of subverting or even taking back power (Harwell, 2017).

Economic Hierarchies in Online Spaces

Without the history and innovation of both CRT and feminist studies, there would be a lack of significant critical theory that applies to those with marginalized identities. However, as noted in these scholarly theories and in critical discourse studies, socioeconomics are arguably the most clear-cut marker of power imbalances that critical scholars turn their attention toward, therefore making them an ideal basis for the creation of scholarship such as critical discourse studies. Debord, whose work stemmed from critical Marxism, examined how capitalism is a purveyor of images: instead of consumers purchasing an item primarily for how it can be used, they mostly purchase the items they do because they are more concerned with the images those items convey. He calls this collectively practiced system the “spectacle”, likening it something one would believe in for entertainment rather than something that is concrete reality (Debord, 1977).

When certain items become symbols for different social categories, it seems that everyone clamors to get the items that show that they belong to an elite social category.

Although Debord's critical insight is concerned with purchasing decisions in the 20th century, the new age of purchases influenced by social and digital media are a new terrain that is most prevalent today. Through her role as an influencer-educator and the discursive choices she makes in her videos, Aina both contributes to and attempts to subvert this hegemonic agenda.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH QUESTION

Although there are many directions that Aina’s commentary touches, her outspokenness about the practices of the beauty, fashion, and social media industries are the most congruent with the goals of critical discourse analysis. Therefore, the research question for this thesis is as follows:

RQ1: How do Black women influencer-edutainers (like Jackie Aina) use discursive practices on YouTube to engage with politically relevant topics in the beauty, fashion, and social media industries?

Aina may be appealing to her audience through posting her “Unpopular Opinions” videos, but it is equally viable that through her discourse, she is referring to how her opinions may be interpreted as unpopular because they either challenge or align with dominant ideologies. It is also possible that she believes that both she and her viewers have been susceptible to dominant ideologies and they may have internalized those ideologies (and in their speech, have “naturalized” them). As stated in the literature review, CDA posits that discourse is inextricable from the social cognitive processes that result in communicative practices that either subscribe or defy dominant practices (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254).

Aina’s unpopular opinions — like anyone else’s opinions who live under the influence of dominance — are informed by dominant ideologies in the beauty, fashion, and social media industries. Although an applied definition of the term “industry” has been difficult to articulate in economic theory (Nightingale, 1978), the definition this thesis uses defines “industry” as “a group of establishments engaged [in] the same, or similar, kinds of production activity” (OECD, 2001). As the analysis shows, there is significant overlap between the beauty, fashion, and social media industries, although

they are separate entities. As of 2020, global cosmetics manufacturing was estimated to have a revenue of \$357.5 billion (Koronios, 2020), global apparel manufacturing was estimated to have a revenue of \$796.8 billion (Couillard, 2020), and social networking sites in the United States were estimated to have a revenue of \$52.7 billion (Diment, 2020).

Interlap between these three industries is evidenced in Aina's ease in talking about all three: while beauty is clearly her senior area of expertise, she has participated in partnerships with fashion companies and uses social media to produce and publish her content.

The deep-rooted relationship between dominant ideologies and successful industries is a reflection of living in a hegemonic society and points to the deep rootedness of capitalism. Aina's economic status was elevated when she shifted her focus on using her beauty and video production expertise to create vlogs that gained considerable popularity (Kwarteng, 2021), which could affect her ability to totally disengage from and disregard dominant ideologies. However, while her successful influencer status affords her certain luxuries that are not as attainable to those who are not influencers, she has the perspective of a Black woman that potentially ground her to the realities of race and gender and how they play out in what she critiques, thus necessitating the use of various disciplines of critical studies to examine why her opinions are so unique and, as she sees them, "unpopular".

Although the titles of the videos focus on what Aina will be discussing, another major component to her videos is her work of displaying makeup tutorials while expressing her opinions. The discourse would not be thoroughly reckoned with if it were

to ignore Aina's actions as an educational entertainer in the videos. Her makeup tutorials are the core of her videos and oftentimes guide the direction of her discourse. Through her tutorials, she is showing how she juggles her entrepreneurial femininity and her goals as a makeup artist who performs gendered, aspirational labor through social media (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy, 2015) and her commitment to producing polished content that can effectively convey her message and her tutorials. The successful execution of this combination is the key to her success as an influencer.

CHAPTER 4
METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

Although many forms of CDA are used to analyze texts that reproduce dominant ideologies (van Dijk, 1993) this thesis is designed to examine Aina’s discursive practices to highlight a marginalized perspective rather than the dominant perspective. This represents a “bottom-up” approach to critiques of dominance, which is contrary to the goals of some CDA studies (van Dijk, 1993, p. 250). This thesis examines the language Aina uses to express her unpopular opinions about the beauty, fashion, and social media industries, using the videos and video transcripts (set to “English-Default” in YouTube) to simultaneously examine the language as it is used in context (Figure 1). However, Aina’s language is altered from the exact transcript wording if the author of the thesis found that the transcript misses or misconstrues a word or phrase. Because video, a medium with several components, requires audio and visual cues, this study will lean on the teachings of multimodality (Machin, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2013) when applied to CDA.

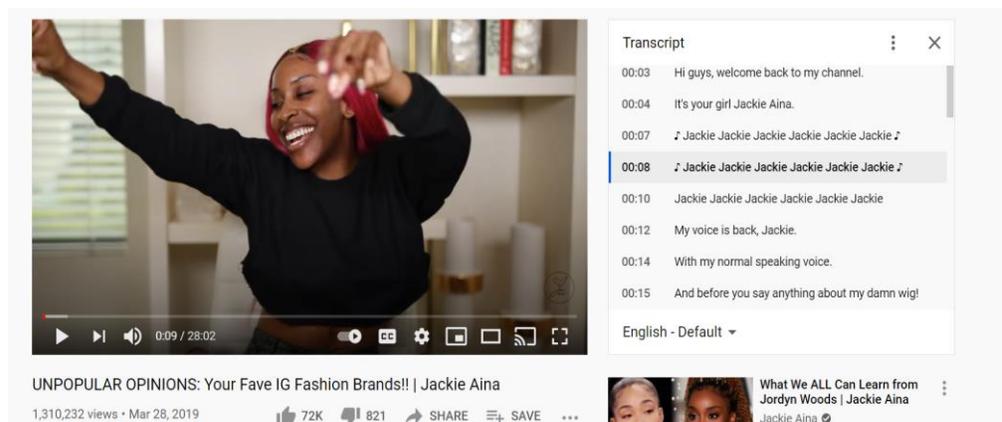


Figure 1: Video with “English - Default” transcript opened for the purposes of better understanding Aina’s discourse. Every video was analyzed in this way.

This thesis uses Aina's five videos that explicitly have "Unpopular Opinions" in their titles as the site of inquiry to analyze the linguistic and critical properties of her speech and subsequently, to answer the research question. Each video serves as a unit of analysis. Before the implementation of this analysis, each video was viewed at least once by the researcher, who is a subscriber to Aina's channel and a specialist in race and internet studies. For the purposes of this study, each video was reviewed to ensure that the content reflects the guiding research question of this thesis. Then, each video was watched by the researcher, who featured what they felt were the most exemplary language and audiovisual discursive elements that could apply to the beauty, fashion, and social media industries and applied to this thesis's research question. Aina's discourse was analyzed through the lens of various critical theories: for CDA, this analysis specifically relied on frameworks described by scholars such as Fairclough (1985) and van Dijk (1993) and those who have added more emphasis on multimodality to the field such as Machin (2013) and Brock (2016; 2020). The analysis includes parts of Aina's discourse that best encompass or summarize notable thoughts about the industries under study that she expresses more fully in her videos.

This analysis also examines how Aina guides viewers through her makeup tutorials using verbal language along with the audiovisual cues that can show viewers what she is doing and emphasize her instructions or her verbal points. The language that is being examined also includes her steps through her tutorials, as these steps contain some insight into or further explanation of her unpopular opinions.

For brevity, the researcher refers to each unit of analysis throughout this thesis with shortened versions of their titles. The videos are listed in the order they were initially viewed for research for this paper. Information about the videos is provided below to provide easily identifiable information for those who are interested in viewing the videos, as well as each video’s publishing information to contextualize Aina’s opinions at the time.

Table 1

Unpopular Opinions: Beauty Guru Edition / Jackie Aina

Date Published	January 25, 2019
Length	26 minutes and 52 seconds
URL	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQX02UNn2ko&list=PLjbB-JgHWXiFS5_Q9vnmvdlZhnWmlyxZd

Table 2

Unpopular Opinions: Beauty Brands That Fell OFF / Jackie Aina

Date Published	May 16, 2020
Length	32 minutes and 52 seconds
URL	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUw6rXGn8fA&list=PLjbB-JgHWXiFS5_Q9vnmvdlZhnWmlyxZd&index=2

Table 3

UNPOPULAR OPINIONS: Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!! | Jackie Aina

Date Published	March 28, 2019
Length	28 minutes and 2 seconds
URL	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BbCA76NfjM&list=PLjbB-JgHWXiFS5_Q9vnvdilZhnWmlyxZd&index=3

Table 4

Unpopular Opinions: Marrying Young and Societal Pressures | Jackie Aina

Date Published	August 16, 2019
Length	17 minutes and 45 seconds
URL	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ijqGhmlOLA&list=PLjbB-JgHWXiFS5_Q9vnvdilZhnWmlyxZd&index=4

Table 5

Unpopular Opinions About INSTAGRAM | Jackie Aina

Date Published	April 24, 2019
Length	21 minutes and 48 seconds
URL	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC5N133B204&list=PLjbB-JgHWXiFS5_Q9vnvdilZhnWmlyxZd&index=5

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

Each of the five “Unpopular Opinions” videos contributed to deciphering the root of the research question. Aina, who has a video editor but nonetheless maintains a heavy degree of creative control regarding the result (Jackson, 2019), is meticulous about the final product of her video. Therefore, her videos are an accurate reflection of what image of herself she would like to portray to the world regarding her beauty tutorials and her commentary — her unpopular opinions would be no exception. This analysis first examines how she utilizes video elements to craft her message, including editing style, video effects, and the inclusion of outside content like meme videos. Then, it examines the language that Aina uses when discussing the beauty, fashion, and social media industries.

Multimodality & Unconventionality in Discourse

Aina uses several non-verbal cues in her “Unpopular Opinions” videos that aid in making her critiques. One of the most subtle but effective uses of her video creation is the set of her videos. Each video, which is held in a studio space and requires many elements found on other video sets (Jackson, 2019), is set up in a deceptively unassuming fashion: impressive lighting, non-distracting (and often white) furnishings, limited decor, and Aina set front and center in the foreground with her beauty products and mirror by her side. Aina even tends to complement the background of her videos with her appearance in the foreground: in “Beauty Guru Edition”, Aina dons a pink wig and wears a pink dressing gown, with white shelves that contain items that complement the pink, including a pink picture frame. When her tutorial is finished, her makeup look also heavily

incorporates matching shades of pink. While the other videos do not take as literal an approach to color coordination, the setup of the backgrounds are harmonious enough as to not cause wandering eyes. In other words, the consistency of her message is mirrored by the consistency of her surroundings. This allows viewers to be drawn into her aesthetically coherent video so that she can retain their attention while she makes her critiques.

There are several cuts in the “Unpopular Opinions” videos that piece together the video clips and their audio. Sometimes, the cuts are so frequent that there are several cuts in one sentence of what Aina is saying. This is further evidence that she is especially careful to only include words or ideas that she believes represent the personality she portrays online. These cutting techniques appear to indicate a desire to talk freely without a script to her viewers while also maintaining control of what she says and making it consistent with their image.

Aina also uses her body as a strong communicator of her emotions and discourse. As a beauty vlogger, the bare, makeup-less face that she begins each of her videos with indicates that the video will also be a makeup tutorial. Excessive gestures and constant body movement (unrelated to her tutorials) are a common feature of her videos. Oftentimes, she uses her body to humorously emphasize whatever point she is trying to make. Sometimes, she adjusts herself by moving closer to the camera and filling the frame of the shot more fully, making sure that viewers can understand the intensity behind her statements. At other points, she adds movement and action that seem unrelated to her emotions and discourse but add to the video as a transitional signifier. In “Beauty Guru Edition”, Aina discusses her opinion about the cancel culture online

regarding the beauty community. The shot immediately following the statement is of her gobbling popcorn from a bag and then cuts to her chewing the popcorn (see Figures 2 and 3). After the seemingly random shots, the video returns to her tutorial as she provides her next opinion.



Figure 2: Aina gobbling popcorn after an opinion.



Figure 3: Aina chewing her popcorn.

Beyond multimodality, Aina talks about her opinions using methods that are not drastically different from the ways that other vloggers deliver their commentary, she does incorporate unconventional tactics to get her message across. One of her most frequently used tactics is the use of song. Like many YouTube vloggers, she welcomes her viewers to her videos with a consistent greeting (Pihlaja, 2018). Unlike many YouTube vloggers, her greeting is a jingle consisting just of her name and an original melody:

Jackie Jackie Jackie Jackie,
Jackie Jackie Jackie
Jackie Jackie Jackie Jackie,
Jackie Jackie Jackie.

In some videos like “Beauty Guru Edition” and “Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!”, she adds a variation to the jingle (in the former, she goes a little longer and whispers the added “Jackie”’s in a shriller tone; in the latter, she adds an extra line of the four-count

part of the jingle and says “My voice is back Jackie” to close it off); but most of the time, the jingle stays consistent. The lighthearted jingle not only is a part of her brand (Harvin, 2019), but it also reminds the viewer that Aina is at the center of the content and she plans to celebrate herself and what she has to say.

Aina also uses the melodies and lyrics to familiar songs and gives them her own touch to serve the purposes of her videos. In “Beauty Brands That Fell OFF”, she does not default to her theme song as the first musical selection for the video. Instead, she takes the 1999 song “I Want It That Way” by the boy band Backstreet Boys and makes it her own. The original lyrics of the song’s chorus explore tension in a romantic relationship (Genius, n.d.):

Tell me why
Ain't nothing but a heartache
Tell me why
Ain't nothing but a mistake
Tell me why
I never wanna hear you say
I want it that way

However, Aina borrows the melody of the song and, employing dramatic vocal flourishes while smiling to indicate her humorous reinterpretation, remixes both the meaning and the lyrics to pertain to the topic of the video:

Tell me why
Ain't nothing but a has-been
Tell me why
Ain't nothing but a flop
Tell me why
I never wanna hear you say
I fell off that way [0:00-0:18]

In this way, Aina reimagines the song, which peaked at #6 on the Billboard Hot 100 after it was released (Billboard, n.d.), and connects with her audience by drawing them with the familiar melody and lyrics.

Discursive Practice of Note: Inclusion of Meme Videos

Despite her expressive persona onscreen, Aina is not the only star of her vlogs. For humorous effect, all of her “Unpopular Opinions” videos include other clips. These meme videos are intended to emphasize Aina’s more critical points without her having to say or repeat them outright.

One of the more popular forms of communication on social media platforms is through the use of memes. The term “meme” was originally conceived by Dawkins (1976), who described them as “the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*” (p. 249). Similar its Internet culture definition now, Dawkins says:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (p. 249)

However, today’s usage of the term indicates an even more complex method of presenting ideas. As a notable part of Internet discourse and participatory culture (Moussa, Benmessaoud, & Douai, 2020), memes do much of the heavy lifting in digital discursive exchanges, relying on shared cultural understandings or sensibilities to convey or emphasize an idea. Images and videos of both public figures and everyday people are just as likely as each other to become memes, as well as images or clips captured from television shows, cartoons, films, publications and other historical and contemporary media (Boudana, Frosh, and Cohen, 2017; Pryde, 2015; Glitsos and Hall, 2019).

Keeping this function in mind, Aina includes meme videos in her original videos as a tool to engage her viewers with potentially familiar material while using the memes to strengthen or make her point. Keeping with her goal of representation, she uses several

meme videos throughout her “Unpopular Opinions” videos that feature Black people. Most of the meme videos she uses are quick clips that follow some of the more critical points she makes while expressing her opinions. In “Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!”, she uses a meme video to punctuate her point after the following comment:

Point that I’m getting at is the unrealistic body standards that I feel this brand contributes to and I — clearly they do it on purpose because like you don’t post all of these people on your pages by coincidence. You just don’t, OK? They obviously know what they’re doing and I’m sick of it!
[6:03-6:19]

The clip that immediately follows is of Andrew Caldwell, who also goes by the nickname of “Mr. Deliver” on social media and describes himself as “an internet sensation known for his famous ‘Im Deliver’ video that went viral in November 2014” (Caldwell, n.d.). The clip is from one of Caldwell’s Instagram Live streams, where he yells and sings (singing indicated in parenthesis): “I am tired! I’m tired. *I’m tired*” (see Figure 4). In the case of Aina’s video, this clip is considered a meme video because of its ability to cross contexts and still produce a culturally significant meaning that enhances the context of Aina’s discourse.



Figure 4: Andrew Caldwell yelling and singing “I’m tired” in Instagram Live meme video. Background blur is an original effect from Aina’s video.

Critiques of Industries

Beauty Industry

Unsurprisingly, most of Aina's "Unpopular Opinions" videos center on beauty-related topics. Aina makes it clear that her primary expertise is as a beauty professional through several clues in her discourse. Bhatia (2020) describes the identity construction that vlogger Kaushal succeeds in as a British-Indian beauty vlogger:

...Kaushal's beauty-how-to tutorials are fairly representative of those typically perceived as 'expert' beauty tutorials on YouTube...drawing largely on mainstream beauty discourse in terms of typical tutorial structure, use of jargon, demonstration of disciplinary knowledge, discursive competence and professional practice, but also included more specific instances of intercultural behavior, so that Kaushal negotiated two interdiscursive identities – expert YouTuber and diaspora Indian. (9)

Similarly, Aina crafts her beauty vlogging expertise and creates a convincing identity performance. While she has the credentials to back up her expertise — she was previously a makeup artist with cosmetics brand MAC as she explains in her "Beauty Brands That Fell OFF" video — it is clear that she wants to be perceived as an expert without her having to repeat those credentials every time she creates a beauty tutorial. In each of her videos, she not only utilizes beauty jargon to offer her unpopular opinions, but she also uses it to describe the steps of her tutorials and the techniques she uses to apply the beauty products. Following are examples of instances of both from a few of her "Unpopular Opinion" videos:

I'm gonna do something really crazy and you guys are gonna think I'm a weirdo, but I'm gonna take a really light concealer and instead of this being my final concealing step, I'm actually going to put this on first. This is from Kevyn Aucoin, the Shade #8. ("Beauty Brands That Fell OFF" [5:58-6:10])

That's why I don't use liquid liner in a lot of my looks, because like we all have priorities, OK? This base is mine. You know for some people, eye looks are their priority. And I feel like liquid eyeliner is again, one of those key things that like you just have to have to get that certain look. ("Beauty Guru Edition" [12:39-12:58])

OK, now I'm going back with our crease color, the brown we used earlier, and Imma start smoking out around the blue. Just to soften. ("About INSTAGRAM" [18:17-18:23])

Outside of her socially conscious critiques, this display of beauty expertise is the most obvious way that Aina can be perceived as an educational entertainer. Through her extensive knowledge of beauty-related topics and her experience as a client-based makeup artist before her transition into full-time content creation, she is trusted by viewers as an instructor, taking those who want to follow along with her tutorials step-by-step through her process while entertaining them with her commentary and humor.

It is also clear that Aina highlights her Black identity to allow viewers to connect with her beauty-related content and discourse. Besides the obvious instances that she discusses being Black, there are other ways that she references her racial identity in her videos. In the tradition of linguistics, it is easiest to examine how Aina relies on culturally identifying language in her videos. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a dialect of English that has been primarily used to describe the linguistic patterns rooted in Southern Black culture (Anokye, 2013) that is now used by Black Americans who grew up in urban environments (King, 2020) but is often attributed to the majority of Black Americans (Anokye, 2013). However, with the increase of globalized media use like reading books, consuming mass media, and Internet usage by individuals and groups of people of countless backgrounds and identifiers, AAVE has been written, spoken, and commodified by non-American Black people throughout the diaspora and even

individuals and groups that do not identify as Black (Chun, 2001; McLaren, 2009; Coming of Faith, 2016).

The labelling of this dialect has been challenged and undergone change several times over the years (King, 2020), and one of the only consistent characteristics is that the definition of the various terms used to describe it have been contested for their focus on a particular subset of Black people in America that does not take into account other factors that may play a role in the language used by all Black Americans including their regional and socioeconomic backgrounds, although scholarship regarding those issues is currently being studied (Jones, 2015; King, 2020). Despite this concern, the need to amplify the dialect to bestow it with legitimacy in the eyes of sociolinguists and the public is one of the reasons the quest for finding an appropriate name and set of characteristics for the dialect continues (King, 2020).

Aina grew up in a California working-class neighborhood that was mostly Latino (Kwarteng, 2021). With two Black parents who were present in her life and did not shy away from their identities, she had difficulty determining whether she was “African” enough or “American” enough (Delarato, 2016). However, because her background consists of two areas of the Black diaspora, she is inherently familiar with how Black individuals across the diaspora express themselves through language. Her presence on the Internet — first as a user, then as an influencer-educator — has also undoubtedly helped her become more immersed in AAVE, as the dialect is now even being considered a standard language on the Internet and in aspects of popular culture like hip hop music, oftentimes overlooking its ethnic and racial origins (Lee, 2011; Kytölä & Westinen, 2015; Coming of Faith, 2016; Overs, 2020).

Although Aina does implement discursive techniques in her videos to appease white viewers and not play into the “angry Black woman trope, she does not compromise on her usage of AAVE. Whether she is casually chatting at the camera about her thoughts on a recently launched beauty product or making a point about discrimination within the beauty industry, she does not drop her usage of AAVE, as evidenced in the discourse included in this analysis. Because AAVE has become so commodified, she is not taking a major risk by including it in her videos, but she also is not deferring to the linguistic rules of what is considered standard English, which is often diametrically opposed to vernacular dialects of English like AAVE (Coupland, 2016). Her liberal use of AAVE further situates her into Brock’s (2020) ratchet framework of digital praxis.

Another method that Aina uses to highlight her Blackness is through speaking about beauty trends — or mishaps — themselves. In “Beauty Guru Edition”, Aina teases her thoughts about non-Black people who use blackface, a way to darken one’s skin to imitate a Black person that typically involves makeup. She expresses her thoughts from the vantage point of being a Black woman whose beauty-related work takes place in a digital space:

Imma let you in on a little secret that I feel like, some people hadn’t really noticed yet, but uh...Black outrage y’all — actually, outrage in general, but specifically, pacifically! Black outrage — is the new marketing ploy, OK? And if you don’t know what I mean, Imma explain. Don’t be sending me videos of these people doing blackface. People know it’s dead wrong, they know it’s dead wrong. [23:38-23:59]

A more affirmative approach to Aina’s Blackness is her willingness to provide background and representation for other Black content creators in the beauty industry. Just over two minutes into “Beauty Brands That Fell OFF”, Aina makes sure to mention that she was watching another Black woman vlogger named Shanygne, who runs the

YouTube channel “Too Much Mouth”. Aina’s recognition makes it clear that she views Shanygne as a valuable part of the YouTube beauty community, particularly because she is Black, which Aina emphasizes when she brings her up. In the same video, Aina also brings some visibility to @NeonMUA and @killerkingggg (Twitter handles), two beauty content creators behind the #ColourPopMeBlack social media campaign. The campaign was created to get beauty brand ColourPop to pay attention to the fact that there was a lack of diversity in its social media posts. Aina even includes screenshots with the creators’ separate Twitter handles as a part of the video (see Figure 5), an opportunity that she does not afford to any of the other content creators she mentions in her “Unpopular Opinions” videos. While @NeonMUA and @killerkingggg are not Black women beauty vloggers on YouTube, Aina seems dedicated to carving out a space for Black beauty content creators to share their triumphs and their grievances, much like hooks (2000) describes as the original intentions of feminist spaces. Because feminism is not about the superiority of women and is rather “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2000, p.1), it requires a community effort that centers around the root of the problem: sexism. Similarly, Aina celebrates Black beauty content creators in the hopes that their efforts can work toward ending racist practices in their industry. Aina’s discursive practices can be said to take on a distinctly feminist approach to building community.

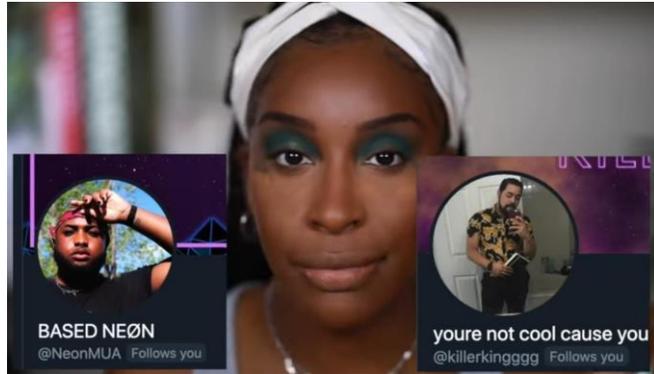


Figure 5: Aina with screenshots of Twitter handles of the creators behind #ColourPopMeBlack.

Aina also occasionally nods to her ethnic heritage in her content and discourse. In “Beauty Brands That Fell OFF”, she makes it a point to mention that two of the products she uses in her makeup tutorial are from brands owned by fellow Nigerians (Nuban Beauty [2:34] and OPV Beauty [19:37]) (Ndekile, n.d.; Kilikita, 2018), saying that because Nuban Beauty is Nigerian-owned, viewers should “stan right now, basically” [2:36-2:38]. In “Marrying Young and Societal Pressures”, Aina discusses the ways that her Nigerian American upbringing contributed to her life journey and led her to the decisions that brought her to her current occupation:

Relating back to career paths and following other people’s expectations, do you know how physically impossible it is to follow someone else’s path? Do you know how many dead ends I’ve come up on following my parents’ path? [9:39-9:52]

At the same time, look, I am the daughter of an immigrant. I understand that a lot of times, they don’t mean anything by it, and they just want a better life for you. Sometimes, that’s not really their call to make. [10:09-10:20]

Taken together into consideration, these two identity constructions are essential in understanding Aina’s critiques of the beauty, fashion, and social media industries, but especially the beauty industry. Because she is an insider in the beauty world who

seemingly achieved her success against the odds, she is uniquely equipped to provide insights about the state of the industry's major players.

However, Aina solidifies her position as a part of the money-making beauty industry ecosystem that encourages consumerism through making sponsored content. Three out of the five of her “Unpopular Opinions” videos contain sponsorships with three different beauty brands, which she discloses at the beginning of each of the videos. In “Beauty Guru Edition”, she partners with the Korean American cosmetics brand KISS. With its motto to allow customers to “Bring the Salon Home” (KISS, n.d.) the company is primarily known for its best-selling artificial nails and popular false eyelashes (Brookman, 2018). In the video, Aina specifically promotes KISS's line of false eyelashes, Lash Couture Triple Push-Up Collection. She makes viewers aware of the sponsorship after giving a quick synopsis of what the video would be about. Then, she cuts to footage of the entire set of false eyelashes from the Triple Push-Up collection (see Figure 6), adding humorous comments about the name and appearance of each set to make them seem more enticing and accessible. The use of gendered language to describe the genderless false eyelashes — a characteristic that she uses in her other “Unpopular Opinions” videos when describing cosmetics products — also indicates that Aina is gearing her sponsorship towards viewers would be comfortable with false eyelashes that, when displayed or worn, take on a gendered association and, like other beauty products, signify femininity (Meagher, 2017):

...‘Teddy’, she cute, she flares out at the end, she a little flirty.
‘Camisole’, she thick.
‘Garters’, for the simple, natural gal... [1:20-1:28]

After the quick plug, the video returns to Aina saying that she will demo the lashes in the video as a part of her completed makeup look.



Figure 6: Aina displaying the KISS Lash Couture Triple Push-Up Collection for sponsorship.

Much like other aspects of Aina’s content, the KISS sponsorship introduction attempts to integrate the products seamlessly into the video with Aina’s signature style of humor that includes a dash of ratchetry. But unlike her other commentary and content throughout the “Unpopular Opinions” videos, the purpose of these sponsorships is to convince people to buy products, rather than her just showing the products off in a tutorial. Such sponsored content for a business is not unique to Aina’s YouTube channel and is often also found in other content creators’ media across various social media platforms like Instagram (FTC, n.d.).

However, do her sponsored content disclosures make or break her reliability in the eyes of her viewers? Referencing an older video she made about sponsored content and how it is not as bad as social media users make it out to be (Aina, 2017), she believes that making sponsored content should not affect her relationship with her viewers [in the earlier video, she says that, considering the costs she incurs by being an influencer who purchases products to review: “...you’ve gotta be out of your mind if you honestly think

we should just do this for good merits and not reap any benefits” [5:26-5:32] (Aina, 2017)]. But in the spirit of honesty, she acknowledges that her sponsored content might unsettle viewers:

Take this from someone who does a lot of sponsored content: obviously I get a lot of backlash for it sometimes. It’s cool, I don’t really care, ‘cause it’s like, I value things like running water, having a house like (chuckles) doesn’t really, you know — See, I gotta pick my battles and I’m not going back to my own life, so you just gon have to deal with it. [20:37-20:51]

After this direct critique of social media users discussing her beauty-related sponsored content, Aina softens the blow by interrupting her thoughts with another step in the video’s beauty tutorial. Such a maneuver is an indication that while she is apt to call out digital praxis that she disagrees with, she also values her viewers and wants to give them a view of the argument from her perspective — thus, the epitome of an unpopular opinion.

It is significant that, rather than continuing to simply participate in producing sponsored content paid for by beauty companies and providing the requisite disclosures, Aina chooses to vocalize her dislike of others criticizing the practice. For someone who is aware of the effects of the proliferation of branded content throughout the beauty world, Aina stays committed to the idea that sponsored content is not as big of an issue as many people consider it to be. She indicates that she believes that viewers of content that includes sponsorships from beauty companies often feel like they are consuming a sales pitch when they watch sponsored content. In many ways, this is what Debord would deem an improvement to consumerist culture: instead of viewing the sponsored brands and products that Aina features in her videos as, on a surface level, needed for survival (Debord, 1977, para. 40), consumers are now even questioning whether they want to engage with such blatant displays of consumerism.

But in Aina’s view, such a strong dislike of sponsored content by viewers is not a nuanced enough argument when it comes to considering the livelihoods of influencers like herself who support themselves financially from promoting products. Instead of elaborating on the situation outside of her comments about her own livelihood being at stake, Aina diverts the attention away from niche influencers and focuses instead on mainstream celebrities and their participation in non-traditional advertising:

I don’t see y’all giving celebrities that same energy when they be in them Pepsi commercials. Celebrities get paid way more, are way sneakier, OK? Beats by Dre in a Bow Wow video — you thought he just loves Beats? No sis, that’s called product placement and he was paid. [21:37-21:50]

Such insights about influencer marketing can be viewed as contributing to the educational moments that Aina incorporates into her videos. Much like her beauty tutorials, she is providing an inside look of how sponsored content operates. However, the comparison between product placement and sponsored content is slightly erroneous. While any kind of financial relationship with a product or a brand is considered a “material connection” (FTC, 2019), product placement is defined by the United States Federal Trade Commission as “merely showing products or brands in third-party entertainment content”, a different phenomenon than sponsored content (FTC, n.d.).

Despite her critique of social media users’ dislike of sponsored content, Aina does note that her viewers are more important to her than any beauty brand who can provide her with compensation for portraying them in a more positive light than she truly feels. In “Beauty Brands That Fell OFF”, she makes this commitment clear. “This is gonna be real awkward if a brand that I really love actually sees this and gets mad but my loyalty first and foremost will always be to my audience, no matter who is cutting the check” [2:06-2:15]. So, unless she had a change of heart about who she prioritizes when she makes her

videos (“Beauty Brands That Fell OFF” was published a year later than “Beauty Guru Edition”), it appears that her criticisms do conflict when it comes to her allegiance to her audience and to her livelihood.

The partnered content in two of Aina’s other unpopular opinions videos — “About INSTAGRAM” and “Marrying Young and Societal Pressures” — are for products that come with a heftier price tag. The former video is in partnership with Mented, a beauty brand founded by two Black women (mented cosmetics, 2017). Aina mentions that she demoed the company’s foundation sticks in a previous video and, much like with her KISS sponsorship, spends most of her time discussing the foundation sticks in the context of their functionality as a product. Outside of her initial introduction about the partnership at the beginning of the video, she discusses the convenience of the foundation sticks for close to two minutes [2:39-4:35], ending with a mention that the product is linked in the video’s description box.

The latter video is in partnership with SK-II, a skincare line launched in Japan that is now Procter & Gamble’s premium skincare brand (Kaur, 2017; Huge, n.d.). Aina’s partnership with the brand also appears to be the primary reason the video was even made. Aina is responding to the company’s “Timelines” campaign as a part of their #ChangeDestiny platform. “Timelines” is a four-part series hosted by reporter Katie Couric that explores the lives of women in Japan, China, Korea and the United States who challenge gender expectations in their respective families and societies (SK-II, 2019).

When explaining her rationale for working with the brand, Aina cites her experiences as a beauty enthusiast and a dark-skinned woman:

Shoutout to SK-II for working with me on this video because as you guys know, a lot of my skincare routine is inspired by Asian beauty and there really isn't a lot of dark-skin representation in Asian beauty. So the fact that I can be a contributor to that is kind of like one of my goals that I wanted to work on this year. So (claps) shoutout to representation and visibility, hey! [0:31-0:48]

SK-II's campaign seems to strike a chord with Aina and her experiences, potentially making it more difficult for viewers to differentiate between her comments that genuinely speak to life without the influence of the campaign and those that are meant to aid in her partnership. Although she only watches and responds to one of the "Timelines" videos (New York City), the video, which she said spoke to her the most out of all of the ones in the series, provides much fodder for her commentary. Malukah, the woman featured in the featured "Timelines" video, is a driven, goal-oriented woman who wanted to put herself first. While Aina says that she and Malukah have different life goals regarding marriage, she agrees that she always aims to make herself a priority. Aina's vulnerability fits seamlessly into the promotion of the campaign, and she even finds other ways to talk about the brand's other work, including their viral documentary (SK-II, 2016) that discusses the "leftover women" phenomenon in China [13:18-13:25], which has developed over recent years. Known as "sheng nu" in China, it is a disparaging title given to any woman who is over 27 years old and unwed and is usually meant to villainize such women's individual successes when those successes do not include a prospective marriage (Usher, 2016). Based on her aptness to reference its work, it is clear that Aina is in a true partnership with SK-II, indicated by her willingness to go above and beyond the bare minimum to promote its products and its works through her discourse.

Hall (1997) suggests that representation is one of the many ways that media makers can effectively share their messages. Aina relies on her verbal discourse rather

than non-verbal discourse like images to prove her similarities to Malukah, but that choice is still a demonstration of shared societal meanings at work. Aina's approach to connecting with Malukah — and thus SK-II — would not be effective if such meanings were not understood by her audience. Hall describes these meanings as “culture”, and somehow, it can transcend other boundaries like differing racial, sexual, or gender identities if using a shared frame of reference:

Cultures consist of the maps of meaning, the frameworks of intelligibility, the things which allow us to make sense of a world which exists, but is ambiguous as to its meaning until we've made sense of it. So, meaning arises because of the shared conceptual maps which groups or members of a culture or society share together. (p. 9)

Aina is therefore relying on various cultural understandings to connect with her audience when discussing SK-II.

And while Aina is willing to work with brands that she believes are value-driven and put genuine effort into making a difference or committing to a cause, she does not appreciate brands who only make such an effort to further their bottom line of profit. The interest convergence at play is business-minded rather than legally minded, with brands seizing the opportunity to appear as socially conscious as possible while racial issues are at the forefront of people's minds and are a major consideration when people choose where to spend their money. In “Beauty Guru Edition” (published before the most recent wave of social justice protests), Aina explores this phenomenon further:

Right now, everyone wants to now cater to the people who look like me. Now, OK? You don't get to tell me that my criticism of those brands is invalid. They're trying to cater to me, OK? You're going to do it, do it the right way. [19:07-19:16]

And I hate when people are like ‘It's a step in the right direction’ no it's not! No it's not! Only people who are not that group of people that they're catering to say that. No, I'm sorry, throwing me a bone ‘cause you trying

to make money off of me and the people in my community is not a step in the right direction. It's a money grab, DUH! [19:33-19:47]

Overall, Aina's discursive criticisms of the beauty industry are complex, as the nature of her occupation as an influencer who makes a living from their content is similarly filled with complexity. While she undoubtedly possesses expertise in beauty, she also has to consider her commitments to the beauty industry as a whole, like other beauty vloggers who benefit from the industrialization of their vlogging (Hou, 2018). When she became an influencer who relied on advertising revenue, audience engagement, and sponsorships to fund her lifestyle, she was arguably able to secure a more independent job than those who have to follow the guidelines set out by a traditional workplace; however, she is also skillfully able to conceal how closely her routine mirrors that of a traditional workplace in terms of allegiance to particular companies and practices for the purposes of monetization (Duffy, 2015). But she arguably also put herself in closer alignment to the negative aspects of the beauty industry by practicing microcelebrity [positioning herself as someone who, through her discursive performances, can be consumed by her loyal viewers while she strategically interacts with them (Marwick, 2015)] — as a beauty vlogger. Aina's discourse when discussing the beauty industry is contradictory and may ultimately encourage her more skeptical viewers to embrace a similarly hegemonic view of the industry.

Fashion Industry

Compared to beauty companies, Aina does not take a particularly kind view of fashion companies, specifically those that do the lion share of their marketing on social media platforms. In “Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!”, there is a specific fashion company that Aina goes after; but she does it strategically: “Unfortunately, I can't say the

name of the brand- (laughs) I'll say enough so that you know, you'll know who I'm talkin' about. You'll *know* who I'm talkin' about." [0:56-1:03]

True to her word, Aina continues this thinly veiled critique by dropping other major hints as to the brand she is referring to. By calling the brand "the most popular" and dropping somewhat incoherent comments to describe the brand's influence early on ("With this brand, it's one of those 'if there's smoke, there's fire.' I think the damn fire done bulldozed the whole company, of like, it's damn near just — it's too obvious to ignore!" [2:12-2:21]), viewers are led to believe that the brand is Instagram fashion giant Fashion Nova. The brand, which has been promoted by social media superstars such as Kylie Jenner and Blac Chyna (Nittle, 2018), also frequently collaborates on lines with such figures. Rappers Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion have both partnered with Fashion Nova for collections. While the former star already had her partnership with the brand when Aina's video was published (Nittle, 2018), the latter had yet to rise to the superstardom that allowed her to earn the collaboration (Howard, 2020). As a result of its high-profile collaborations, the brand has become synonymous with Instagram fashion.

Aina reiterates that she cannot name the brand in several ways throughout the video, seemingly fending off responsibility for any retaliation that her viewers may use to target the brand, although she does say that she does not want any kind of pushback against the brand for her sake. Despite this, she leaves verifiable information about what brand she is talking about by including two screen recordings of the brand's Instagram feeds (its main page and its page dedicated to "curvy" women). When cross-referenced, both feeds are identical to the brand's pages' feeds (see Figures 7-10 for comparative screenshots). Viewers can assume that because Aina has only loosely encoded what

fashion company she is referring to for the bulk of the video, the decoding process takes on one that most closely mirrors that of a dominant viewing. Aina’s clues are easy to catch onto and verify and utilize many “preferred readings” that rely on common knowledge within the fashion and social media industries to get her message across (Hall, 1973/2018, p. 269). From her position as the deliverer of the discourse found in the video, she can guide the viewers to understand her position against the company without even having to resort to saying the company’s name. While the preferred readings that Aina encodes into her discourse do not quite have the ideological or political bent that encoded meanings in mainstream media tend to include in their messaging, her intent still proves impactful because, as an influencer, her ideas can make a substantial difference in the promoting or buying practices of her viewers.



Figure 7: Screenshot of fashion brand’s main page.

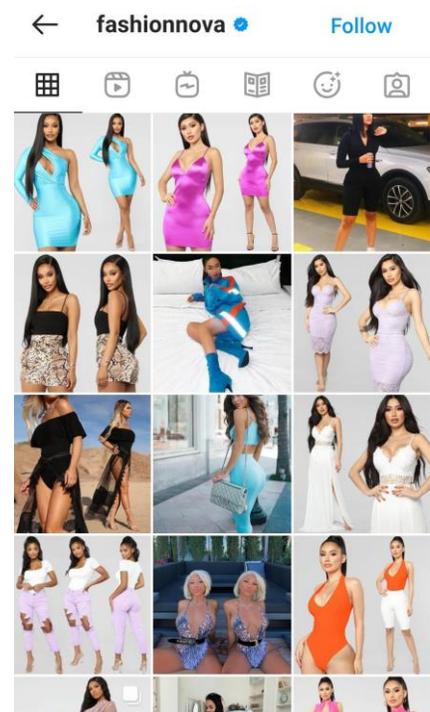


Figure 8: Screenshot of Fashion Nova’s Instagram page, taken by the researcher of this thesis.

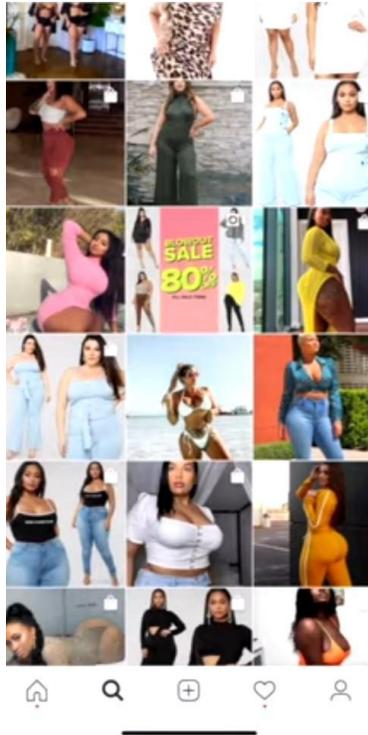


Figure 9: Screenshot of fashion brand's "curvier" page.

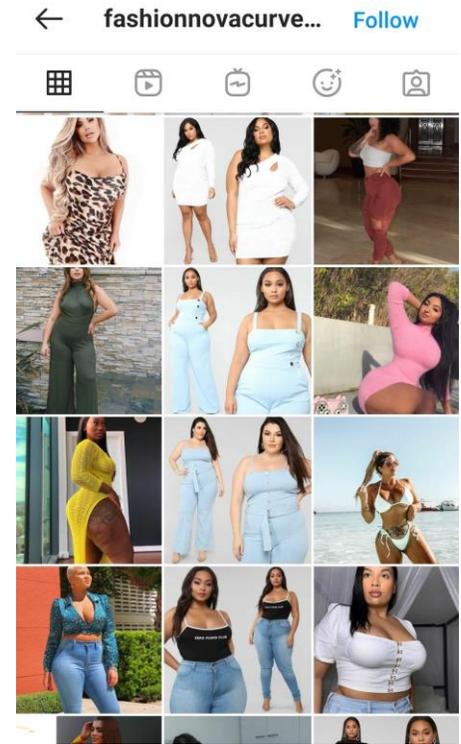


Figure 10: Screenshot of Fashion Nova Curve's Instagram page, taken by the researcher of this thesis.

However, Aina does discuss how her critique of Fashion Nova can be consequential for herself. The video begins with a shot of Aina, looking mischievous and sighing reflectively, bluntly stating “My team does not want me to make this video” [0:00-0:02] (this clip is a preview of a later part of the video, found from [15:05-15:07]). This indicates that she is aware of the potential pushback she can receive — financially and otherwise — for speaking out against a brand. She makes it apparent that her principles are more meaningful than the backlash she knows she will receive from the company, a move that seems to go against the logic of maintaining monetized partnerships with brands.

As Aina launches into her opinionated perspective about Fashion Nova, it becomes clear that she is not especially interested in criticizing other fashion brands for

their actions, despite the title of the video indicating that she would be discussing various brands. Early on, she says that her critique will be bundled up in one for Fashion Nova: “I’m going to be highlighting some of the problems with the main perpetrator of those fast fashion brands in today’s video” [1:11-1:18]. For example, she uses Fashion Nova as a vehicle to discuss the role of Instagram fashion boutiques in promoting certain body standards (see the *Social Media Industry* section of this analysis) but does not specifically call out how this same issue could apply to other Instagram brands besides Fashion Nova. This indicates that the title of her video and her critique is not as universal as she initially claimed.

In the second part of “Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!!”, Aina organizes her critique of the fashion industry around a secondhand email exchange that she says occurred between the brand and one of her fellow YouTubers (unnamed), who is a dark-skinned Black woman. Aina was provided with copies of the email exchange after the YouTuber sent them to her out of frustration. Aina spends more than five minutes reading and discussing the email exchange between the YouTuber and a representative from the company, which details how a partnership between the YouTuber and the company fell apart after the YouTuber brought up the fact that the many of the brand’s Instagram posts did not feature women of color. The YouTuber sent them posts to feature on their page, and they did not do it because they said the clothes she modeled and their corresponding sizes were out of stock.

Using her discernment as a Black and dark-skinned influencer, Aina denaturalizes the naturalized language that Fashion Nova uses in the email exchange. She does not give the Fashion Nova representative’s responses to the unnamed YouTuber much validation

but does see an opportunity that may have passed the unnamed YouTuber by in the exchange. She primarily saw an issue with the way the YouTuber described the problem to Fashion Nova representative: whereas the unnamed YouTuber said she wanted to see more representation from who she referred to as “women of color”, and many of the women on Fashion Nova’s Instagram page are light-skinned women who could be considered racially ambiguous. As a response, the brand representative sends links to three recently hired models who fit the racially ambiguous mold. What Aina really thinks the YouTuber could have said was “dark-skinned women”. However, Aina does not give the Fashion Nova representative a pass for pleading ignorance in her response:

I feel like she’s being a little disingenuous trying to pretend like she doesn’t know what she’s talking about, I kind of do. Because all of these women are of lighter complexions: none of these women are dark, so...And see unfortunately, because she asked her — ‘women of color’ is kind of a vague term. I do feel like sometimes people throw it around a little too loosely, just a little too loosely. [10:25-10:48]

As Aina’s recounting of the YouTuber’s email exchange with Fashion Nova representative progresses, she gets visibly more annoyed with the language used by the Fashion Nova representative, positioning the representative’s interaction with the YouTuber in a negative light. As Aina ends her section on the interaction, she uses highly racialized terms to describe the way the Fashion Nova representative behaved in the exchange:

I mean, I just feel like it’s just all-around *ghetto* when you are a multi-million dollar company, you sent out products that really are insanely cheap, extremely inexpensive, and you’re asking for me for them back. I just feel like you couldn’t write that \$150 as a loss, you know? Like I don’t — that’s just so ghetto to me. It’s so hood, what kind of hood is this? [14:22-14:45]

The term “ghetto” has historically been used in a manner to describe those deemed as outsiders. With roots in anti-Semitism, ghettos were urban spaces that were designated

for the relocation of certain groups of ethnic Jewish people in Europe starting in the 14th century (Haynes & Hutchison, 2008). In the United States, ghettos are associated with segregated, urban environments populated by Black Americans that are often centers of impoverishment and blight, what Gans calls a “race-class” definition of “ghetto”, one of the various definitions that can be applied to the complex word and concept (2008, p. 353). As such, it is commonplace that, even in historical perspectives, anything that is associated with any usage of the word “ghetto” is also deemed undesirable (Haynes & Hutchison, 2008, p. 348).

Brock (2020) differentiates between “ratchet” and “ghetto” in his work, saying “Ratchet shares connotative space with ghetto but differs from ghetto’s aesthetic thanks to its enactment and performance of militant insouciance” (p. 128). The recognition that the two are similar but different underscores Aina’s (who, as mentioned earlier, frequently employs a ratchetry in her Black digital praxis) use of the term in this context. While Brock is not conceding that “ghetto” is an inherently harmful term, Aina is using the term’s more negative connotation to make a point that there are certain kinds of such behavior that are acceptable, fun, and can still embrace elements of the connotations that “ghetto”, “ratchet”, “hood”, et cetera, embrace.

Throughout history, there have been attempts to reclaim the ghetto as a place that is not inherently negative (Haynes & Hutchison, 2008; Thrasher, 2017). However, the negatively charged version of the concept of “ghetto” is clearly what Aina is implying through her use of the term, and she has noticeably removed it from its normally racialized context and applied it to a brand that she believes that embraces Black

aesthetics but not Black people [particularly dark-skinned people, with darker skin being commonly associated with negative actions (Alter, Stern, Granot, et al., 2016)].

Aina makes mention to the blackface phenomenon again like she did when she referenced blackface in the beauty industry in “About INSTAGRAM”, this time when comparing Instagram fashion boutiques to luxury fashion companies and appears to refer to the backlash received by fashion house Gucci on social media for employing imagery resembling features of blackface on a sweater in its Fall/Winter 2018 line (Held, 2019; Cartner-Morley, 2019). Similarly to her insistence to not name Fashion Nova by name and instead, to drop heavy-handed hints, the luxury fashion brand she is referring to can be inferred by her ruling out other luxury brands, the major controversy Gucci’s runway show caused, and the date of the video’s publication as compared to Gucci’s blackface controversy:

We not talking about the Fendis or the Diors and that. They’ve already made their money and their millions. They don’t need to be doing the little, you know, foolery that’s going on right now. Some of them are doing other things like blackface but that’s a (chuckles) different story for a different day. Well, not Fendi and Christian Dior, I’m just saying, the other one. You know what I’m talking about! [5:58-6:14]

Such commentary is one of the few instances of Aina providing a more industry-wide critique about a particular issue -- in this case, racism.

In the final portion of “Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!”, Aina discusses her business relationship with Fashion Nova and how she ultimately dissolved it because of her disagreement with the company’s practices. She says that her work as a partner with the brand started because she was already a customer and the company repeatedly reached out to her with a sponsorship offer after it discovered that she already wore its clothes. There were no bumps in the road for Aina and her collaborators at Fashion Nova

until, after speaking to the YouTuber she cites in the video, she decided to take them to task on their brand representation and colorism. After telling her manager and agent that she was not comfortable working with the brand anymore, she was told that the company would consider giving her more money to remain a partner. However, Aina turned it down and worked her way out the contract:

I love not struggling, uh, living paycheck-to-paycheck. I love being able to contribute to my family. I love the fact that I can break generational curses. Not at the expense of compromising what I believe in, and what's important to me. [22:58-23:09]

Despite the potential legal and financial disputes she may have faced from Fashion Nova, Aina was willing to face whatever challenges arose from ending her contract with the company early. She notes that she has enough money to sustain herself without the deal and that:

...there are a lot of people who are very easily influenced and are swayed by money, and trips, and and PR boxes. Both big and small influencers — let's keep it all the way one hunnid. But yeahhh not me. [23:17-23:28]

While this sentiment is not a total departure from Aina's assertion that sponsorships and partnerships are a necessary part of an influencer's business model, it does show a side of her that is more focused on substantive change within the fashion industry rather than being the recipient of a fashion partnership.

Aina's insistence on discussing the ways that fashion companies perpetuate racism, colorism, and general discrimination against Black people is perhaps her most outspoken stance in her commentary about the beauty, fashion, and social media industries. Her critical perspective, while not as informed by experience as her beauty opinions, is informed by lived experiences that relate to her intersectional identity as a dark-skinned Black woman (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Drawing on real-life examples,

she shows an acute awareness of the methods that the fashion industry uses to align itself with dominant ideologies of race and how it seemingly relies on gendered labor (Duffy, 2015) and “gendered social arrangements” (Lazar, 2007) to sell its products. As Aina rejects those beliefs and practices in favor of anti-discriminatory business models, her discourse reflects their decisions and can be used to persuade her viewers that her opinion is justifiable.

Social Media Industry

As mentioned in the *Beauty Industry* section of this analysis, Aina frequently references other creators who contribute to the beauty community on YouTube. But she does not limit her actions to exclusively recognizing Black content creators. During an opinion about beauty brands collaborating with the beauty influencers who actually appreciate their products in “Beauty Brands That Fell OFF”, Aina gives her flowers to fellow beauty vlogger Shae of the YouTube channel ThatGirlShaeXo, who she says she loves and notes is an avid fan of ColourPop. As such, she believes that the vlogger deserves a collaboration with the brand.

However, Aina does not hold back about the disrespect she has felt from other YouTubers when they do not support her at the level that she believes she supports them. During one of her unpopular opinions in “Beauty Guru Edition”, she expresses distaste at the one-sided nature of some YouTubers’ digital praxis. With her carefulness to not name names, she details her personal feelings:

I really find it disappointing when like, someone that I like on YouTube collabs with brands multiple times and they get so much love and they don’t like reciprocate that support. Like, it’s kinda stingy bruh, like I don’t ever see you posting other people’s collabs. You don’t see nothing wrong with that? I don’t like that, I definitely noticed it a couple times you know. Especially my collabs, like I don’t want to pressure anybody into posting

what they don't want to. But I definitely seen like you just went out of your way to not support me, you know. It's a little weird. [22:24-22:54]

Just a few seconds later in the video, Aina applies her personal sentiments to the beauty community:

...it's like hurtful 'cause it's like you know the beauty community at one point was just about showing how we could be fun and reciprocating support to one another. And I feel like we've kind of lost that and it's just become kind of this like 'I don't value your partnership as much as I value my own.' [23:00-23:15]

While Aina immediately clarifies that it is expected correct for vloggers to place their own business matters at the top of their concerns, she nonetheless mourns the loss of a community effort to help one another grow. Her concerns about unity in the community are similar to those expressed by Lazar (2007) when discussing the ways that those in the post-feminist movement have made the movement self-centered rather than one that uses the issues that those in the movement have to advance together (see reference to "personal as political in this thesis" literature review). But rather than Aina's dispute with the lack of community lying in human rights concerns, her issue is ultimately concerned with the loss of materialist outcomes that may come out of not sticking together as a community.

At the same time, she directly addresses people who watch people who watch her content. These viewers are her direct audience, as she often uses "you", "y'all", and "you guys" in her discourse throughout most of her videos to indicate that she is having a dialogue with her viewers. Aina's makes her conversational approach to her viewers explicit in more ways than just her tenses, however. In "Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!" she begins by making a general statement about her dislike of the genre of social media vlogs that are labelled "Get Ready With Me" (often abbreviated to "GRWM" in their

titles). Vlogs that are labelled as such, she implies, may not be as welcoming for viewers and does not foster the intimacy she wants to create on her channel, saying:

So I'm actually getting ready to go to a party-arty-arty tonight, and I figured since you guys love hearing me ramble about most topics, we would do a 'Get Ready With Us' — 'Get Ready With Us', I actually like that. Instead of 'Get Ready With Me,' 'Get Ready With Us.' Let's get ready together. [0:32-0:46]

In this way, Aina is demonstrating that she wants to create a bond between herself and her viewers, which suggests that social media platforms like YouTube are reliable spaces to fulfill that need.

At the same time, Aina directs much of her criticism not to products, brands, or industries directly but mostly to her viewers. “About INSTAGRAM” is not so much about the design, features, or creators behind the platform; rather, it is about the behaviors that users exhibit there and on other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Although the title of the video suggests that Aina’s opinions will focus on Instagram as an entity, her discourse indicates that she views Instagram not so much as a company, but more as a community with actors who have their own motivations for their actions. Many of Aina’s critiques in the video center around what she calls “social media etiquette” that users — even fellow content creators — do not follow. Much of the etiquette that she refers to revolves around upholding practices that could potentially generate revenue for a user or for someone that a user follows. In this way, Aina is thinking about the functionality of digital labor. Duffy (2015) discusses how up-and-coming fashion bloggers rely on gendered “identity myths” of amateurism, autonomy, and collaboration to amass a following (p. 52). Thus, the success of the fashion bloggers’ work is contingent on the interactions users have with it. When bloggers who subscribe to these values in their self-branding are seeking to climb the ladder of success within the

blogosphere, they also often present these values as “authentic”, even though they are prioritizing their business-minded model that puts revenue-motivated content at the forefront of their actions (p. 53).

This attitude is evidenced in one of Aina’s critiques of Instagram users who self-promote their pages or content under other users’ posts. Aina does grant a bit of leniency, saying that those who post self-promotion under other users’ posts can do so if their self-promotion is relevant to the content in the original post. She also admits that sometimes, such “social media etiquette” is unspoken and for some users, may take some getting used to. But she is adamant about the inappropriateness of those exceptions when it comes to self-promotion, employing a business rationale to justify her opinion:

And, I promise you, if it’s not relevant to the post that you’re commenting on, you’re gonna get nowhere. ‘Cause like, no one asked for that. No one came to the photo looking for new people to follow. They came to the photo ‘cause they liked the person that they’re following [15:34-15:47].

It is important to note that while Aina clearly values self-expression and play in her digital praxis, she values an ideological approach to social media etiquette, one that encourages users to keep potential capital and social recognition at the forefront of their digital praxis. Her discursive choices therefore serve the purposes of that capitalist-driven, ideological discursive formation (Fairclough, 1985). Aina’s acknowledgement that it takes an adherence to the norms established in social media culture and those that are encouraged by social media companies points to an implicit understanding on her part that hegemonic digital praxis is an inescapable part of the online experience.

One of the first indications that Aina critique about Instagram is not about the company itself and that it is in reference to her broad observation that the company seems to be influencing the physical appearance standards for women, is early on in the video.

“I definitely think - not that it’s Instagram’s fault - but I think that Instagram is ruining body standards” [4:46-4:54]. She even goes as far as to call such bodies “Insta-bodies” and saying that the platform has “completely repopulated and rewired people’s brains into just reiterating what they consider the standard of beauty and what the standard of acceptance is: in body shapes, in looks, in features” [4:59-5:10].

After unpacking her statement, Aina eventually alters her conclusion and decides not to place the blame squarely on Instagram’s shoulders, outright saying that she really does not think it is the platform’s fault that such beauty standards have become so prevalent on the application: “Instagram is just in the business of making money. I don’t think they have a particular agenda to push, per se” [5:22-5:30]. Rather than saying that the company is a willing participant in the spread of the rise of a specific body type on Instagram, she lessens her critique of the social media platform and places more emphasis on individual Instagram boutiques and pages promoting the page.

But Aina’s reluctance to cite Instagram’s lackadaisical attitude about the harmful body standards pushed on its platform (Tolentino, 2019) is precisely why Instagram’s inaction can be considered worthy of critique. It would not have been especially difficult for Aina to do: from cultural commentary YouTube and Tik Tok videos to testimonial articles, it has become commonplace for digital users to critique Instagram’s role in promoting a particular look for women to adhere to on social media (which Aina describes in “About INSTAGRAM” as someone “with a 16-inch waistline, with a 35-inch hip”) and there have been others who have criticized the platform and other social platforms that focus on its unwillingness to admit its role in the spread of a particular standard of beauty (Tolentino, 2019). In Aina’s apparent hope to be diplomatic about the

issue, she shys away from actually providing an unpopular opinion about Instagram and instead, critiques its users and the businesses who promote their merchandise on the platform, although Instagram can easily be determined to be responsible for much of the reach of such businesses (Newberry, 2021).

In “Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!”, Aina even establishes herself as someone without a one-sided view of plastic surgery — one of the methods used to achieve the “Insta-body” and the “Instagram face” (Chandler, 2019; Giles, 2019; Tolentino, 2019) — by mentioning that she got her “breasts done” the year before making the video [4:07-4:13]. Although she has had cosmetic surgery, she seems appalled by the extremes of the “Insta-body”, having said in a previous video from 2018 addressing her breast augmentation that she wanted to opt for a more natural looking procedure that she describes in the 2018 video as her wanting “period boobs, slightly fuller than what they normally are” [13:57-14:00] (Aina, 2018). As a person with first-hand experience with the surgical procedures involved in body alterations, she can be perceived as having advanced discernment of the optics from the consumer side of the issue. Like the women interviewed in Sobande’s (2017) study who talked about the educational value of natural hair vlogs, Aina’s experience with cosmetic surgery may contribute more validity in the minds of viewers than someone who does not have any or as much background with the experience. She even claims to know when others have participated in it:

...’cause now that I have my boobs done, I’m starting to kind of be like ‘Oh, yeah, that’s a boob job.’ Before I never knew what that looked like, like I was kind of naive and I was kind of like, ‘She could be born with that though. I don’t know man, that’s kind of like up for debate.’ Now I can totallyyy, totallyyy see it. [5:20-5:36]

“Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!” also sees Aina reckoning with the rise in cosmetic surgery while also condemning how it contributes to unattainable expectations that mirror the riskiness of those in the past:

So I feel like a lot of what we’re seeing with Insta-bodies is very similar to what we saw in the 90’s: thin was in! A particularly, dare I say, dangerously type of thin was in. [3:04-3:16]

With some Insta-bodies, like, that bothers me that people are striving for a body type that like, literally just looks like we invented this new shape. [3:34-3:40]

Comparing the 1990s “heroin chic” body standard (Heroin chic, 2015) and the “Insta-body” of today, Aina is acknowledging that media play a large role in people’s determination of what they or others should look like. Mass media that glorified extremely frail models in the 1990s were fairly inflexible in terms of what body types they allowed consumers to see, whereas social media are spaces for users to select what kind of content they see on their feeds.

Aina proves herself to be someone who is representative of a social media landscape that embraces surgically enhanced bodies. However, her version representation is not without its layers. Hall (1997) proposes that “representation” does not encompass a “one true, fixed meaning”; rather, it is a process between multiple parties that “will depend on what meaning people make of it; and the meanings that they make of it depends on how it is represented” (p. 7). So while its clear through her discourse that Aina seeks to represent herself as someone who has embraced cosmetic surgery and therefore cannot be overly critical of those procedures, her other critiques of cosmetic surgery may cause her viewers to forget or not seriously consider that she is arguably a representation of today’s surgically-enhanced body standard.

However, the algorithms developed and utilized by social media platforms are not without their faults, and according to users (Smith, 2018) there are plenty of them. Aina chooses to comment on the way that Instagram's algorithm delivers content to users that they did not ask for, a subject that Aina does not investigate by name in her "About INSTAGRAM" video but only hints at:

A lot of people are getting stuff done to say that they got it done. But like at the hands of someone who's not even licensed, not even a real doctor. They're getting all of this crazy stuff done because they're trying to keep up with a standard that they're constantly seeing on their Explore page, by way of some of these brands. [4:54-5:09]

Because algorithms are the core function of social media platforms and are the drivers behind what content is placed on users' feeds, Aina's lack of critique against Instagram's algorithm and those who develop it is quite an absence. Instead, she puts the blame on brands on the platform, when Instagram is currently the home of the largest social media account following for Instagram boutique and fast fashion brands like Fashion Nova and PrettyLittleThing based on verifiable follower counts (Fashion Nova, n.d.; PrettyLittleThing, n.d.) and has much to do with those companies' successes (Siegle, 2019; Monroe, 2021).

Interestingly enough, Aina also spares YouTube, the home base for her videos, any kind of substantial critique. Instead, she takes on other YouTubers in the beauty community. Although many influencers have spoken out against the platform for some of its more questionable practices like large scale demonetization (Alexander, 2017; Thomson, 2019) of content that is eligible for advertising dollars from YouTube's Partner Program. Perhaps this is not an issue that Aina has dealt with because she is primarily considered a beauty vlogger and, as this thesis studying her "Unpopular Opinions" videos suggests, does not often make blatant social commentary videos that cannot somehow

also be designed as makeup tutorials. However, her silence on YouTube-related issues is notable because she is a successful influencer-educator on the platform. While Aina has already taken the plunge and critiqued specific practices and companies within the beauty and fashion industries, it seems it is going to take her more convincing to outright condemn the social media platforms that are responsible for housing her content.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Simply put, Aina does not use her “Unpopular Opinions” videos to critique entire industries: as evidenced in her aptness to consider both sides of an issue in her opinions, she is clearly not comfortable with using language and the audiovisual elements of her videos to totally condemn the industries she references. Rather, she focuses on the topics in which she has expertise and extensive knowledge and critiques them: individual businesses, individual actors, and beauty, fashion, and social media practices.

As Brock (2020) discusses, to execute her critiques as a Black woman influencer-educator, Aina uses “racism-as-frame” and relies heavily on ratchet humor achieved through both her language and audiovisual elements. Aina’s multimodal approach to discourse assists in broadcasting her opinions to her viewers by employing various techniques that convey her messages. Grabbing viewers through the aesthetic choices she uses in her videos and relying on shared cultural understandings like meme videos to emphasize her points are just a few examples of how she demonstrates that language and audiovisual modes of communication are not as disparate as previously believed by those who study linguistics (Machin, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2013).

However, Aina’s delivery is still influenced by outside circumstances like her existing brand partnerships and potential sponsorships. Because she must honor her economic interests as an influencer in some cases, a level of economic respectability that values hegemony and capitalism is present in her discursive practices. But these values do not compromise her willingness to critique parts of the beauty, fashion, and social media industries.

Such an approach leaves viewers to wonder whether Aina has been compromised by the industries she dually participates in and critiques. When studied under the lens of sociocognitive principles (van Dijk, 1993), is the overall effect of her language naturalized to default to the materialistic values of dominant beauty, fashion, and social media practices? Or, through her opinions, has she come to a place of denaturalization that allows her to express herself without relying on language that does not integrate such values? She is acutely aware of the interest convergence that has occurred in recent years when companies speak out against social justice issues and, by broadcasting her opinions about such companies brings awareness to the hypocrisy of some companies' efforts to release statements of support for those in marginalized groups.

Aina is not unique in having to negotiate her values when posting her “Unpopular Opinions” on YouTube. Although the titles of the videos suggest that the opinions are going to be controversial, her opinions hold more consequence than the opinions of those who do not rely on their public discourse to make a living. Evidence of the riskiness of speaking out against large companies or industries on social media (particularly for Black women content creators and influencers) can most pointedly be found in Aina’s “Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!”, where Aina specifically does not name the YouTuber who had a dispute with Fashion Nova. By selectively including only certain identifying information, she exemplifies how influencers must juggle both their economic interests and their critiques, meaning that instead of totally rejecting the social media systems they are a part of, they choose to participate in them — but only when they are able to manipulate their discourse on their own terms.

There is a marked difference, however, in how Aina critiques the different elements within each industry. Because she is a beauty professional before all, she saves her most detailed and thorough opinions for beauty companies and beauty practices. But her discourse demonstrates a sympathetic approach: she often lauds beauty companies for their products while mildly critiquing them for some other element of their business. All of her brand partnerships in the “Unpopular Opinions” videos are with beauty companies whose products she even uses in her tutorials, signaling to her viewers that those brands can be trusted and thus, boosting those brands' reputations.

As an influencer whose livelihood is dependent on the engagement she receives from social media users, Aina does not commit to strongly critiquing social media platforms in her “Unpopular Opinions” videos. Instead, she saves her ire for those platforms' users, paying close attention to the ways in which they conduct themselves when engaging with herself and other influencers. This appears to be a strategic and self-preservationist approach on Aina's end. By framing the videos as critiques of social media platforms — which her users are presumably aware of since they will most likely be watching her content from YouTube — she knows that viewers will initially be drawn into her content. However, she turns the tables by speaking out against the ways that users behave on those platforms, thus fulfilling the promise of delivering “unpopular opinions” without risking her standing as an amicable influencer.

Where Aina takes the broadest and strongest position against an industry is when she is speaking out against the fashion industry. Compared to the other two industries, she has the least amount of involvement in fashion: therefore, when she discusses it, her discourse partially takes the position of a concerned consumer who is openly displeased

with the industry's racist and colorist business practices while partially tackling her distrust for the fashion industry as an influencer. While Aina saves most of her disdain for the fashion industry for fashion brands that also have a large social media presence like Fashion Nova, she does comment on the similarly racist practices from luxury fashion brands. Her discourse suggests that she is not interested in letting any fashion company off easy. Even though she previously held a partnership with Fashion Nova and shows off her luxury fashion acquisitions on her social media accounts (Kwarteng, 2021), she does not mind being portrayed as a critic of the fashion industry if it means that she can maintain integrity.

Despite Aina's converging interests of social justice and profit, viewers can still take pride in her self-representation as a Black woman vlogger who does not shy away from her identities. When she uses her position to voice her discontent as a popular beauty vlogger through her social media platforms, particularly on YouTube, that voice is loud. Her outspokenness brings attention to issues that many others have been attempting to spotlight to no avail. Not only do her opinions represent those that many of her viewers share (one only has to look at the thousands of comments that agree with her takes) but her social media presence is also dedicated to uplifting other content creators who share a similar identity or background to her.

Aina has established an online presence that advocates for and creates community among the online beauty community and interested social media users, especially on YouTube. Her desire to include her viewers in her discourse by referring to them directly and asking them to interact with her content appears to be both an engagement technique that serves her economic needs and a sincere effort to connect with those who support

her. The latter cause is displayed most readily when she deliberately recognizes the work of other content creators and speaks up about her desire to put her audience first. Thus, viewers are assured that she is someone who cares about the interconnectedness of the online beauty community and wants those involved to promote an open and honest space, falling in line with feminist theory (hooks, 2020). However, Aina's approach falls short of praxis due to her economic motivations for such a space. Because entrepreneurial femininity and aspirational labor like influencer marketing and compensated content creation skillfully disguise just how aligned they are with traditional modes of capitalist money-making (Duffy, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015).

It is unclear what concrete impact Aina's discourse has had on the industries she critiques. Viewers have praised her boldness when utilizing her social media accounts on various platforms but she is still not in the position to make a significant change within a major beauty, fashion, or social media company because she is not an executive in such a company. As evidenced in her participation in the "Pull Up or Shut Up" campaign, she recognizes the importance of individuals with diverse perspectives and backgrounds in leadership positions within the industries she critiques.

Aina values representation not only in positions of power, but also in depictions of positive lifestyle content. She pointedly acknowledges that she is not afforded opportunities to rest and enjoy material goods, with white non-Black YouTubers receiving positive feedback for flaunting their luxury acquisitions while she is perceived as "fake or I've changed" (Kwarteng, 2021). Because she often receives disparaging comments about her luxurious lifestyle from social media users, she recognizes that her experience is not unique, noting that Black women influencers are not taken to task about

their embrace of economically indulgent practices (Kwarteng, 2021). Such an observation is not as clearly pronounced in her “Unpopular Opinions” videos, but it is the backbone of her critiques as both an influencer and a Black woman. She launched her lifestyle brand FORVR Mood in 2020, which primarily sells candles and other home products with the expressed purpose of “changing the narrative” about what Black women want and need in their lifestyle products:

Black women deserve more than perseverance and strength. Black women don't always have to be strong. Black women deserve self-care. Black women deserve luxury. Black women deserve to be spoiled. Black women deserve. (Aina, n.d.)

Hall's (1997) assertion that “representation” is the creation of media makers and manifests when it is disseminated to an audience with a similar cultural understanding is key to grasping the importance of representation to Aina's values and brand as a social media influencer. Because she is among the popular Black women who have the global reach and the financial resources to show off wealth, she takes advantage of her position and makes sure to portray herself as someone who works hard to maintain her lifestyle but also splurges on herself when she wants to do enjoy what her line of work has afforded her. Similarly, she has encoded the media she creates without regard to certain dominant ideologies, like those that insist on whiteness as the source and beneficiaries of luxury items and lifestyles. Instead, she wants her viewers to decode her messages and acknowledge that they promote luxurious lifestyles for Black women.

Approaches to social and racial justice that prioritize representation are occasionally challenged by critical scholars (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) but nonetheless hold a powerful place in movements like the “Pull Up or Shut Up” campaign. Aina has said that while she does not consider herself an “activist”, many people still expect her to

be the authoritative voice on Black issues in the beauty community (Kwarteng, 2021). However, instead of taking them all on, she thinks deeply about the comments and sentiments she decides to share in both her videos and her interviews, and overall, wants to ensure that her message does not get lost in delivery by those who engage with her content. Therefore, Aina uses her role as an influencer-educator as a way to inform and inspire, but not to push socioeconomic reform.

But Aina's approach to only vaguely critiquing the social media industry may be shifting. After a lull in uploading videos to YouTube, Aina recently released an update video (Aina, 2021) that, among personal updates, discusses her current approach to being an influencer, content creation, and taking time to focus on her other interests and business ventures. In the first half of the video, she assures viewers that she "needed a break" from YouTube as she works on developing new social media accounts on Tik Tok and Instagram, with the former focusing on home and lifestyle topics rather than beauty content. She suggests that those opportunities have been more instrumental to her progress as an influencer and business owner and takes a more critical stance against YouTube than she did in any of her "Unpopular Opinions" videos:

I haven't been uploading on YouTube because I've been everywhere else. I not only have been frustrated with the lack of growth opportunity, special privileges that have been afforded to some other YouTubers that a lot of us as Black creators don't even get access to at all...For the most part I wanna diversify, I wanna branch out, you know? [4:42-4:56; 5:12-5:16]

Since Aina is seeking alternative platforms to create content, she does not mind being more vocal about how the social media industry operates. She frames her decision in part as a response to what she implies to be selective and discriminatory practices that YouTube uses to reward its successful influencers, which was not a stance she took as stringently before in her "Unpopular Opinions" videos. This discursive choice is similar

to the outspokenness she exhibited in her “Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!!” video by verifiably if not openly criticizing Fashion Nova after cutting her contract short with them for reasons related to racial discrimination. Clearly, such issues are where Aina draws the line between honoring silence between brands and companies she works with and bringing their shifty business practices to light.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Because influencer marketing ultimately relies on the same capitalistic models and motivations that other forms of marketing use to be effective, Aina's discursive practices in her "Unpopular Opinions" videos and in her public persona is not surprising. Aina's role as an influencer-edutainer does not allow her to abandon the beauty, fashion, and social media industries: she can only critique them. This is not an intrinsic issue with her politics. Rather, the critiques made in this thesis about her lifestyle falling short of her politics is an exploration of how she navigates the inescapable reality of capitalist and hegemonic demands that all Black women who choose high-paying and visible careers must satisfy. In fact, it is an age-old challenge that those who promote radical social and racial politics have also had to reckon with in their praxis (Fredrickson, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Influencer-edutainers are able to express both their economic interests and their commitment to informing and educating their viewers. Influencer-edutainers who are Black women explore topics related to their area of expertise along with including socially-relevant information such as insider information about their respective industries, along with politics and social justice concerns. Although the educational entertainment Aina provides is not an absolute guide on the ins and outs of the beauty, fashion, and social media industries, it does provide insight on a successful content creator's point-of-view, specifically an influencer who identifies as a Black woman. Such a perspective is valuable, as both historically and contemporarily, Black creators have not often been recognized for their creative labor: especially such labor that white creators could profit

from and claim as their own (Morris, 2019). Intersecting issues such as racism, sexism, and classism remain barriers for Black women content creators who want to share their work with the world while making a living.

Without the contributions of Black women content creators, however, the Internet would not be the same as it is today. As content creators of all backgrounds produce more content for their respective industries and influencer marketing becomes more prevalent on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Martínez-López, 2020), such education about how capitalist and hegemonic interests converge with digital praxis is more important than ever. Communication studies and media studies are interdisciplinary enough in nature to accommodate the intersecting issues addressed in this thesis. However, this thesis contributes to the field of communication and media research by examining the experiences of Black women influencer-edutainers whose unique discursive practices reveal the ways that Black women navigate commercial and educational interests.

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