BLACK INFLUENCERS:
INTERROGATING THE RACIALIZATION AND COMMODIFICATION
OF DIGITAL LABOR

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how Black influencers navigate the highly competitive

commercial terrain of influencing. Situated within literature about the commodification

of the Black feminine body, neoliberal discourses about individualized digital labor, and

the racialization of discourses about Black labor and success, I argue that celebrity status

flattens and makes palatable political projects easily consumed by digital audiences. In

particular, brands and digital media companies appropriate woke culture at the expense of

Black communities, influencers, and people by propping up economic solutions to racial

strife and diversifying their public facing images. By offering individualized, market-

based solutions, brands and media outlets obscure the systemic forces that plague Black

influencers who are precariously positioned within a mode of digital labor that lacks a

supportive infrastructure and exacerbates their vulnerabilities. Contextualized by the

George Floyd protests of 2020, I further argue that Black influencers do not internalize

neoliberal logics or pursue aspirational labor in the same way as their white counterparts

due to the material vulnerabilities and systemic pressures explicitly shaping Black

women's experiences on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Rather, Black influencers challenge traditional definitions of influencing, traversing the

line between 'conventional' and political work by actively addressing the way systemic

issues permeate the sphere of digital labor. Although Black influencers adopt a hustle and

grind mentality indicative of neoliberal governmentality, they also work to reclaim their

bodies, voices, and individuality against a space fraught with the politics of

representation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Black influencers have trillions in spending power. And you're ignoring the market." So begins a Twitter thread from @AliciaTenise, a lifestyle blogger and Black Instagram influencer who began screenshotting online press coverage of social media influencers' sponsored travel, publicly noting the racial discrepancies among the influencers invited to high-profile branding opportunities (Tenise, 2019). The thread is a small—but telling—example in that Tenise asserts companies and brands continue a decades' long habit of sabotaging their respective profit margins by continuing to dismiss Black consumers, this time in digital contexts. Tenise's critique is but a piece of larger social media trends from recent years that have drawn attention to a lack of Black representation in media and culture industries.

As social media users have called for greater representation and visibility for Black figures, actors, and content creators in film, television, and digital media, companies such as Buzzfeed, Refinery29, and PopSugar have responded in kind by publishing articles noting the top Black influencers to follow. These articles overtly address the silencing of Black voices in media and creative industries exemplified by statements such as: "[w]e have to acknowledge that for far too long, fashion hasn't done enough to amplify Black voices" (Weil McKinley, 2020). Taken together with @AliciaTenise's personal project documenting the apparent whiteness of influencer opportunities, these endeavors propose solutions for effectively incorporating Black voices and communities into the public eye that are largely market-based.

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Although public conversations about Black identity on social media platforms and media attention have increasingly focused on overt racism and police brutality in recent years, Black- owned businesses have flourished as commentators urge individuals to support them amid social unrest. As consumers search for alternative ways to uplift Black communities, companies have offered mechanisms to do so (Bonilla, 2020; Dodds, 2020; Haas, 2020; Paule & Forman, 2020). For instance, in July 2020 the food delivery app Uber Eats added an in-app page titled "Support Black-owned restaurants" waiving all delivery fees for Black-owned restaurants and highlighting their efforts with the line "[y]ou asked for an easy way to order from Black restaurants – we listened" (Hale, 2020; Morillo, 2020; Uber Eats, 2020).

In the push for greater attention to be paid to Black communities and Black businesses, the Black influencer has become a beacon of "Black excellence" and a model of equitable representation across social media platforms (BlackExcellence, 2020; Blavity, 2020; George The Poet, 2020; Mushimiyimana, 2016). As influencers, they are an integral part of the hyper-capitalist relations that characterize digital economies, but Black influencers are not solely out to make money by endorsing high-end products. Rather, they often claim a political mission evidenced by their very existence (Sobande, 2017; Tate, 2016). The Black influencer exists at the nexus of racially charged American identity politics and a strategy to de-marginalize Black communities through acts of consumption, uncomfortably bridging commercial realities and political imaginaries.

Both scholarly and popular attention has focused on the rise of influencers over the past decade, and the figure has come to dominate cultural and media landscapes.

Within the scholarly literature, influencers have been defined as "micro-celebrit[ies]" whereby individuals gain recognition, cultural authority, and brand deals through self-promotional tactics that accentuate their most likable traits utilizing digital platforms (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2013). However, Black influencers are often perceived by major brands as appealing to niche communities within industries; Black influencers often receive partnerships with Black-owned cosmetics companies like Juvia's Place and not with brands owned by international conglomerates like the L'Oréal subsidiary Nyx. Likewise, the modifier *Black* influencer presumes Black creators are engaged in a distinct type of work that differentiates them from their white counterparts by virtue of their racial identity (Danquah, 2011). Rarely presented as comparable to white influencers and rarely commanding commensurate financial deals, Black influencers are instead relegated to the margins, presented as producing content meant for niche groups (Sobande, 2017). This 'specialty' categorization can be lucrative insofar as influencers are able to provide their followers with special discounts for exclusive brands but can also mean limited opportunities for Black influencers unable to catch the gaze of major brands and companies willing to partner with them (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Sobande, 2017).

In a similar vein, Black history, culture, and aesthetics are often invoked in ways that generate profits for other, non-Black influencers, thus commodifying Black identity and its expression (Adair & Nakamura, 2017; Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Noakes, 2019). This act of appropriation extends from a history of economic and cultural extraction felt by Black communities. Apart from the inherent racism of appropriation

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and material inequities of exclusion in digital labor, the overt politics present in some

Black influencers' content further marginalizes these individuals from brands that

otherwise attempt not to alienate potential customers with political content. Scholars

argue that brands value difference and political activism to the extent it is catchy,

profitable, and poses little threat to existing capitalist structures, for example, Instagram

feminists who espouse post-feminist values like individual choice as empowerment at the

expense of collective action (Banet-Weiser, 2018; hooks, 1992; Pruchniewska, 2018;

Saha, 2018).

Likewise, companies are willing to align themselves with "woke" expressions of

racial activism so long as they do not become targets of critique, or at the very least, are

able to paint themselves as sympathetic interlocutors who have graciously given voice to

the voiceless by way of digital platforms (Brock, 2020; Buccitelli, 2017). This position

ensures activism's potential threats to profitability are quelled before they can take root,

encouraging influencers to utilize the digital tools of the oppressor to make themselves

heard. Black communities, struggling for equal access to cultural, economic, and digital

resources, have limited opportunities to promote overtly collective political messages

across easily accessible digital platforms, especially across platforms characterized by

labor politics that mask a uniquely neoliberal inequity under the guise of American

bootstrap rhetoric that celebrates individualized opportunity (Coates, 2004; Gilbert, 2016;

Goldberg, 2009).

Because the digital platforms on which influencers work are predominantly

visual, influencers are disproportionately female (Duffy, 2015; Gill & Scharff, 2013;

Marwick, 2013). The unique platform affordances of Instagram and YouTube prioritize the visual, rendering both space and bodies consumable in ways that give rise to gendered and embodied forms of digital labor such as Instagram modeling and beauty vlogging (Stevens, 2021). For Black influencers, however, the heavily visual and performative nature of influencing presents unique challenges. Because the body is commodified through visual platforms and the commercial context of digital labor, Black women are subject to playing into longstanding stereotypes about the Black feminine body (e.g. the jezebel stereotype) from which they must distance themselves to succeed as influencers. The history of chattel slavery which necessarily commodifies Black bodies coupled with the sexualization of the Black feminine body places Black influencers in a precarious position where their bodies are markers of both desirability and political realities (Cheers, 2017; Hartman, 1997).

The way Black influencers navigate commercialized digital spaces is a noteworthy object of study as it makes legible the logics and mechanisms by which digital labor and influencing work operate at the individual and cultural levels. My study weaves together literatures on race and digital culture, neoliberal governmentality, and the commodification of the Black feminine body as the theoretical nexus to interrogate the experiences of Black female influencers. In the following pages, I outline a critical analysis of Black influencers' work by way of interviewing Black influencers from YouTube and Instagram; examining Tumblr posts where users discuss influencers and Black feminism on #BlackTumblr; and, analyzing online popular press coverage about Black influencers alongside content produced by Black influencers. Scholars note that the

work of Black influencers is simultaneously marked by a uniquely political element: to be a Black influencer is to be perceived as an activist (Sobande, 2017; Sobande, Fearfull & Brownlie, 2019; Tate, 2016). Drawing on theoretical critiques of neoliberal discourses, racialization, and commodification, I explore how Black influencers navigate an environment characterized by both intense competition for attention and a fraught politics of representation.

Chapter Map

For clarity, I will preview each if my following chapters to provide a road map of how my arguments about Black influencers build on one another. The following chapter reviews the literature in which my study about Black influencers is situated. I first map the way Black women's bodies have been commodified through the advent of chattel slavery and how they have subsequently been fetishized by white viewers who exoticize the Black feminine body while disavowing it as an object of lust and danger. I then explore how the work of influencing itself is an inherently commercialized act, compounding Black women's own commodification. Relying heavily on neoliberal discourses of amateurism and American-bootstrap rhetoric, the literature on social media influencers demonstrates how neoliberal logics undergird this type of individualized work on digital platforms which exacerbate racial, gender, and class discrimination. I then examine literature about Black influencers – of which there is little – who are disproportionately associated with beauty and natural hair care, pulling working definitions of what Black influencing is and looks like. After mapping the way race is fundamentally embedded in digital platforms and subsequent expressions and negotiations of Black identity through social media, I chart the

literature on Tumblr as a critical discursive space where Black feminism and cultural conversations flourish. I end this chapter by considering the gaps and limitations my study presents and identifying the conceptual tools I use to unpack my data, using these insights to introduce my research questions.

The third chapter more thoroughly examines the theoretical tools and concepts I identified in the literature review, examining how racialization has become inherently performative in digital spaces. I then explore the scholarship on "technocultural discourses," noting the way Tumblr provides a space where marginalized communities coheres yet discussions about Black women are largely overshadowed or appropriated by white feminism (Brock, 2018, p. 2). The next conceptual tool I unpack is neoliberal governmentality which provides a language for describing the way individuals internalize market logics, thus commodifying the self. The chapter ends by charting the literature about how those neoliberal subjectivities are then racialized, adapted for minority communities rendered most vulnerable by the system itself.

The subsequent chapter similarly explores another set of theoretical concepts which focus on the commodification of the feminine body. The literature charted here explores how promotional labor is attractive for female participants and how "aspirational labor" in particular imagines young women as ideal subjects for Instagram modeling, beauty vlogging, etc. (Duffy, 2015, p. 49). I then examine scholarship about the Black feminine body and its unique history of commodification, exploring how the issue of hypervisibility is greatly exacerbated for Black women online. Specifically, hypervisibility refers to the double-bind of visibility Black women navigate in online contexts. Exacerbated by digital

platforms and the publicly visible nature of influencing work, hypervisibility provides a

language for examining how Black women are rendered invisible through their

underrepresentation, algorithmic means, and dismissals of their lived realities despite the

disproportionate and more intense scrutiny they face in a voyeuristic digital sphere that

renders them uniquely vulnerable (Noble, 2013). Here, the body becomes a site of

convergence for neoliberal logics and racialized gender stereotypes that dictate the deeply

rooted and highly public racial tensions regarding how Black women look and act.

The fifth chapter charts the methods I utilized to conduct my multimodal critical

discourse analysis. This section breaks down each of my data sets: popular press coverage

about Black influencers; Instagram posts and YouTube videos sampled from various

influencers' accounts; Tumblr posts about racialization and Black influencers; Tumblr

blogs focused on Black women, Black feminism, and Black history; and, interviews with

Black influencers. I include a summary of how much data I collected for each set as well

as the time spent in doing so. Each subsection charting the individual data sets draws on

the specific theoretical tools outlined in previous chapters that will be useful in analyzing

that data and answering my corresponding research questions.

Chapter six is the first of my analytical chapters and draws heavily on the media

discourse to argue that Black women's bodies and voices have been appropriated by brands

and media companies. Supplemented with interview data, this chapter tokenism in

influencing campaigns and partnerships. I further argue that Blackness becomes a measure

by which Black influencers' usefulness is gaged in my examination of the B2B press

(shorthand for business-to-business press, articles, and content that target other industry

professionals and entities) which focuses on how to identify and collaborate with Black influencers. The chapter ends by situating Black influencers' work amid the George Floyd protests and COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 during which a sudden surge in articles about Black influencers became prevalent.

The next analytical chapter examines the concept of Black Excellence and its inherent connection to white standards of success, considering the term's totalizing logic which instructs Black individuals to succeed largely in professional fields for the sake of their entire race. After unpacking how the media discourse about Black Excellence problematizes its limited view of Blackness and success, I then analyze the tag #BlackGirlMagic prevalent throughout the media and Tumblr discourse about Black women and labor. I argue that this gendered form of Black Excellence is used alongside post-feminist discourses to encourage Black women to 'hustle' and internalize competitive neoliberal logics about the self and one's value. The chapter ends with an analysis of the way Black influencers subvert traditional definitions of influencing by virtue of the type of racialized work they are expected to perform, straddling the line between conventional influencing and online activism.

The last analytical chapter examines how the qualifier 'Black' when referring to Black influencers marks them as Other, and considers how Black influencers are expected to comfortable address race and incorporate it into their content drawing heavily from the interview data and media discourse. This chapter lays bare the systemic issues which continue to dog Black influencers evidenced through the wage disparity between themselves and white influencers. I argue that Black influencers subvert neoliberal logics

by virtue of their precarious positioning as Black women operating in a highly individualized and competitive digital space. As the media discourse provides individual, market-based solutions to racial strife, Black influencers negotiate their identity on their own terms within an explicitly racist, sexist, and classist system.

In the concluding chapter, I argue that this commodified iteration of celebrity flattens political projects to make them more commercially palatable. Black influencers' identity provides them with cultural capital which is particularly lucrative for brands and companies looking to diversify their content, but simultaneously renders them intelligible *as* Black. After considering how Black influencers have carved space for themselves to exist simply as people, I reflect on my own position in higher education and personal struggles with hypervisibility in the field to demonstrate the sheer reach of these deeply rooted systemic realities before reiterating the idea that Black influencers subvert the criticisms often associated with influencing work by virtue of their lived experience.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because my study is situated within the contexts of digital and neoliberal labor, market logics, and Black (feminine) identity, the literature from which I pull to substantiate my work and explore Black influencing is necessarily varied. The literature which explores how Black women have been represented and fetishized in visual media helps foreground the scholarship on influencing as an inherently commercial and visual endeavor. Examining the ways in which Black women have historically been positioned as commodities further contextualizes the experiences of Black female influencers as they are forced to continually brand themselves and their content by virtue of participating in the highly competitive and publicly visible field of influencing.

Literature that explores how race is conceptualized in digital spaces and embedded in digital technologies similarly provides a useful framework for understanding how specific platforms such as Instagram and YouTube privilege visual, embodied forms of engagement and self-promotion. Those platforms' emphasis on pleasurable visual aesthetics is contrasted with Tumblr's focus on the discursive; coupled with the site's particular anonymizing features, Tumblr operates as a haven for collective action, critical discourse, and activism where conversations about racialized labor flourish. The distinction between Instagram and YouTube's visual orientation and Tumblr's more discursive nature speaks to the different racial affordances each platforms possess; where Tumblr enables users to enact more discursive expressions of race,

Instagram and YouTube enable explicitly appropriative and commodified expressions of race by virtue of monetization.

To foreground my study about Black influencers, it is necessary to explore how American slavery has shaped perceptions about the Black body and its subsequent treatment in commercial and digital spaces. Because influencing is predicated on neoliberal logics that encourage participants to view themselves as commodities, the body becomes a site of convergence where these dynamics are actualized. For Black women working as influencers, they must navigate a competitive terrain in which stereotypes about Black femininity shape their experience as digital laborers. Although visually-oriented platforms like Instagram and YouTube exacerbate the Black feminine body's fetishization, discursive platforms such as Tumblr offer a space characterized by anonymity where minority groups can find community and negotiate identity outside of an inherently commercialized context.

Race and Digital Culture

Racialization has a lengthy, sordid history, but new media have facilitated these processes in subtle ways toward equally discriminatory ends. Racialization refers to the processes by which racial and ethnic identities are assigned to communities and the practices utilized to maintain those socially constructed boundaries; the resultant categorizations are often stratified along tangible and discernable attributes (i.e. physical differences in skin color, hair texture, and facial structure or linguistic and cultural practices) (Brock, 2009; Buccatilli, 2017; Nakamura, 2013). Theories of race in media scholarship are characterized by how race is made to "mean" in cultural, technological,

and mediated contexts and explore how race is made, produced, distributed, and enacted within digital spaces (Brock, 2009; Brock, 2020; Buccatilli, 2017; Nakamura, 2008; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013).

Performativity becomes a key feature in identifying and understanding processes of racialization especially in digital spaces because the body is obscured online; Twitter is one space where racial performativity is particularly prominent (Buccitelli, 2017; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013). Brock (2012) employs critical race theory to analyze the significance of Twitter amongst Black users and the ways it enables cultural conversations about race, cultural texts, and political issues. Here, race is necessarily performative because cultural competence becomes a measure of membership.

Similarly, Brock (2012) and Sharma (2013) have discussed the technocultural dimensions of new media and the ability to constitute racial identities online. Scholars examining Twitter and the circulation of racialized hashtags on Black Twitter, specifically, (i.e. "Blacktags") assert that the circulation of such tags create meaning-making practices which give rise to new and unique types of identity (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Nakamura, 2013; Sharma, 2013). "Blacktags" are instances of meaning being used to construct and reiterate black identity across Twitter, much in line with Nakamura and Chow-White (2013) and Mooney's (2018) understanding of the affordances and practices associated with racialized hashtags. Regarding the performative nature of race online, Florini (2014) echoes Nakamura's (2013) argument that the signifying capabilities of bodies are concealed by the digital medium, and thus, a user can – and often must – assert their black identity through cultural knowledge and competence

(e.g. using the appropriate Blacktags and responding appropriately to shared black experiences in collective discussions online).

Scholars who have examined how race is negotiated online often examine the affordances of specific media platforms and their contribution to racialization processes (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013; Sender & Shaw, 2017). For these scholars, social media continue to marginalize Black voices while simultaneously providing the tools for those voices to cohere and engage in collective forms of thought, action, and relational connection. In this way, new media provides tools and spaces accessible to Black communities even as these same technologies afford other exclusionary practices. The affordances of a particular platform also change the way Black users participate and engage with the space and interact with other users, content, and ideas. Some of the essays featured in Nakamura and Chow-White's (2013) book examine the relationship between social networking sites, racial identity, and data mining, noting that racialized data becomes a commodity for which big tech companies are willing to buy, perpetuating practices that literally commodify racial identity (Coates, 2004; Goldberg, 2009; Jones & Mukherjee, 2010; Kapoor, 2013). Additionally, Nakamura and Chow-White (2013) examine the "racial affordances" of certain digital platforms, or the mechanisms that enable or disable users to engage in performative racial practices (p. 114). Instagram is one such platform where the visual idiom and mechanics of tagging practices boost user-generated content in a way that makes the performative aspects of racialized identity especially evident (Stevens, 2021).

Commodifying and Fetishizing Black Women

It is no accident that the digital platforms on which most influencers work are monetized. Instagram and YouTube are especially well-suited to women working as models, travel bloggers, and beauty vloggers, yet each platform's focus on aesthetically pleasing body-centric imagery and the overt monetization of the sites themselves make influencing an inherently commodified endeavor. For Black influencers, this space of bodily commodification is connected to a much lengthier, racist history. Because of American chattel slavery's continuing cultural legacy—a legacy in which Black bodies were literally treated as commodities to be bought and sold—cultural, political, and economic understandings of the Black body are embedded in an inherently commodified context that adapts and changes across new milieu over time.

In the digital era, the hyper-visibility of influencing accelerates this dynamic and makes it readily apparent. Hartman (1997) and Gallego (2016) map the history of Black women's commodification through biological and cultural forms of control and argue that publicized forms of voyeurism such as slave auctions and the tragic case of Sarah Bartmann whose body was mutilated, dissected, and publicly displayed after her death reinforce Black bodies as curious, foreign objects, particularly for Black women. hooks (1992) argues that Black women's bodies have historically been offered up as spectacles for curious white elites and practitioners, their isolated parts used as "evidence to support racist notions that Black people were more akin to animals than other humans" (p. 62). Taken together, the analyses of chattel slavery and parlor culture situate the Black body

in an explicitly capitalist context in which Black women are degraded and objectified, robbed of their agency in the names of science and pleasure.

Similarly, Alexander (2011) focuses explicitly on the field of physical medicine, mental health, and (dis)ability, exploring how medical procedures and legal stipulations (e.g. the one-drop rule and modern cosmetic surgery) are further utilized to regulate and shape the (Black) female body. Arguing that auction-style rhetoric and imagery is perpetuated through academic institutions, medical fields, and culture industries, Alexander (2011) asserts that Black women are now encouraged to auction off their voices as legitimate purveyors of knowledge and culture. This sentiment is particularly evident in the wake of the George Floyd protests after which Black influencers experienced a sudden influx of primarily white followers and partnership offers from companies who wished to amplify Black voices yet simultaneously and forcibly placed Black content creators under magnified scrutiny with the expectation that Black women *want* to educate white audiences (McNeal, 2020).

Other scholars examine processes of commodification in terms of its ability to alienate the Black body from itself, citing the fetishization of the Black feminine form as one example. In her work to reinterpret the Black feminine body as a site of healing and empowerment, Gallego (2016) uses Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cyprus & Indigo*, Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, and, Toni Morrison's *Home* to situate the Black body amid the history of its aggressive fetishization and commodification. The literature in question destabilizes our understandings of race, gender, and sexuality while explicitly grappling with idea that Black bodies have been coveted and adored as much as they

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have been commercialized and violated. Meri Danquah's (2011) argument about the love/hate dichotomy impressed upon Black bodies is especially salient here: "The black body, whether whole or broken down to its parts, was 'ized' in every single way something could be. It was racialized, fetishized, romanticized, demonized, infantilized, criminalized, dehumanized, sexualized, criticized, ostracized, ritualized, and, much more often than we think, it was also prized" (p. 14). Danquah (2011) further draws on bell hooks' *Black Looks* to assert how control over the Black body through slavery, laws regarding reproduction, and the one-drop rule have subsequently given rise to intense struggles over representation. Gallego's (2016) exploration of Black literature acknowledges and subverts dehumanized, capitalist readings and histories of the Black feminine body as dangerous and alluring; instead, Gallego (2016) points towards the creation of more nuanced portrayals of Black femininity as one strategy for combating the Othering legacy of slavery which renders Black women commodities in the first place.

Black women have historically sought to reclaim narratives about Black womanhood while navigating its politicization in the years following Jim Crow era policies and the Civil Rights movement. Examining the politics of natural hair as an outgrowth of Black women's desire to claim agency, Walker (2000) maps the trajectory of Black hairstyles, beginning with the Afro in 1960s America. Examining how Afros "evolved from a political statement to a beauty culture commodity," both Danquah (2011) and Walker (2000) argue that Black women sought to deradicalize public perceptions about Black femininity and reframe Black feminine identity within the

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context of commercial beauty. The rich, historical context for the evolution of natural hair politics positions both processes of politicization and commodification at the site of the Black feminine body. Beauty companies looking to capitalize on Black markets quickly pivoted to embrace the progressive, natural style, shifting narratives around beauty to include Black women (i.e. Black consumers). The newfound 'appreciation' for Black natural hair in the beauty industry illustrates Danquah's (2011) double bind regarding the Black female form, rendering Black identity inferior yet permissible through consumption.

Media and Culture Industries' Commodification of Black Identity

To fully understand how racial identity and its commodification have become embedded in digital platforms, we must first consider how industries themselves have continued to exploit the Black body toward profitable ends following the formal end of slavery. Black cultural products have proven a lucrative avenue for such an activity, yet Black women's inclusion in those products (e.g. rap and hip-hop, styles of dress) is defined largely by preexisting stereotypes about Black femininity perpetuated through media representations. In this way, media products such as music, movies, and television paint a picture of stereotypically sexualized and aggressive Black femininity from which Black women must distance themselves to be taken seriously in their personal and professional endeavors.

Given the way Black women's bodies have been violated, controlled, and objectified, media and creative industries within the cultural economies facilitated the fetishization of the Black feminine body more easily. Collins (2005) asserts: "The new

racism requires new ideological justifications, and the controlling images of Black

femininity and Black masculinity participate in creating them," citing culture industries

as the primary perpetrators (p. 121). Like hooks' (1992) and Noble's (2013) discussion of

the "pornification" of Black women in visual and digital media, Collins (2005) examines

how Black women have been forced to adhere to emerging stereotypes, disguised under

post-feminist ideals concerning sexuality and individual agency (p. 35). Specifically, she

notes the rise of Black exceptionalism to combat prevailing stereotypes about Black

women as jezebels and "welfare mothers" perpetuated through media (Cheers, 2017).

The subject of Black excellence is a sharp contrast to the materialistic and sexualized

portrayals of Black women in the music industry, most notably Lil' Kim and Missy

Elliott as Collins outlines in her book. The eroticization and fetishization of the Black

feminine body are further exemplified by entertainer Josephine Baker who was similarly

parodied in Keri Hilson's music video for her R&B song "Pretty Girl Rock" – along with

Diana Ross and other Black singers – in which Keri emulates iconic Black stars and

singers throughout the 20th century (Harry, 2014; hooks, 1992).

Returning to the notion of exceptionalism, Blackness is partially modified in

terms of class. Subjectivities rooted in Black excellence give rise to a new middle class

'Clair Huxtable type' which reframes (Black) authenticity as diluted engagement with

Black cultural forms distanced from traditional stereotypes (Collins, 2005). In essence,

successful Black women working career jobs are free to listen to rap and style themselves

as they please, provided they distance themselves from the aggressive virility of Black

femininity. Spillers (1987) argues that under hegemonic interpretations of race and

ethnicity, the body becomes a target for both exploitation and reverence, drawing heavily on the historical context of W. E. B. DuBois' notion of Black exceptionalism which has since given rise to Black excellence. The popular narratives surrounding Black influencers draw heavily on Black exceptionalism as brands vie for their attention (i.e their voices and bodies) in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. Yet, these companies continue to drastically underpay the very Black content creators they outwardly wish to support, eager to include them in a one-off marketing campaign to diversify the brand's image amid the civil and racial unrest. Once again, the Black body operates as a site of convergence in which race and gender are shaped and negotiated around the embodied, commercial labor of influencing on digital platforms.

The Neoliberal Logics of Social Media Influencing

Influencing work is predicated on the notion that individuals associate their worth and success with capital gain. By promising wealth, celebrity, and personal fulfillment, neoliberal logics encourage individuals to engage in precarious labor to achieve their dreams while reinvigorating the market through competition. The rise of the social media influencer has been a source of fascination and critique for media and communication scholars for the past decade or so. Scholars have expressed both optimism and suspicion regarding what influencing means as an increasingly viable mode of digital labor across America's largely unregulated capitalist landscape. Situated within the context of Silicon Valley and a tech start-up culture focused on constant growth, the literature focuses largely on influencing as a form of labor where the demands of digital capital are increasingly individualized (Duffy, 2015; Giddens, 2013; Marwick, 2013; Szeman,

2015). This emergent form of labor is inextricable from the market dynamics undergirding social media platforms. From Instagram models and beauty vloggers to motivational personalities and celebrities, neoliberalized forms of digital labor now dominate much of the media landscape as a viable path to income and professional fulfillment. Influencing work fits well with what some scholars call "aspirational labor," which rationalizes precarious, individualized labor with the promise of fulfilling a personal dream job (Duffy, 2015, p. 49). The rise of influencing is further underscored by branding logics that incentivize the use of one's personality to recommend products to their followers.

  As ubiquitous as influencers may seem on one's Instagram feed, there are defining features which draw boundaries around what we can conceivably recognize as an influencer. Influencers are defined by their self-promotional strategies and partnership with brands coupled with a massive following on social media sites (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2013). This working definition posits the presence of endorsements for individualized labor as the key feature when identifying and understanding influencers. Scholars assert that in order to effectively differentiate oneself from the masses of social media users, influencers must mobilize their most likable traits to increase their following, leveraging their personalities to draw in new users. In this way, scholars argue that personality has become a commodity in its ability to provide social media users with greater following which can then be monetized by way of brand deals (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2013). In essence, the

influencers with the most moxie – and, in turn, the most draw – are those most likely to receive lucrative brand deals and partnerships. Here, personality is hailed as a necessary and invaluable component in being a successful influencer.

As an integral part of being an influencer, a personable and charismatic personality is key, but appearing relatable and authentic are equally vital. Scholars argue that part of what is being sold and marketed in neoliberalized individual work is the personality of the influencer and the extent to which they appear authentic to their online audiences (Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013). Here, influencers are understood as a sort of "micro-celebrity" whereby individuals can gain recognition, authority, and brand deals through self-promotional tactics that accentuate their most likable traits (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2013). Authenticity in visual platforms requires a different and heightened degree of performativity in digital spaces and is another defining feature of the path to being a successful influencer (Duffy, 2015; Pruchniewska, 2018). Portraying an authentic self by being relatable to one's followers with some degree of transparency about one's life is necessary to an influencer's success.

Duffy (2015) asserts that visible and relatable forms of authenticity, buttressed by myths of amateurism and autonomous work, ultimately mask the reality that self-branding practices replicate industry structures and logics, modeling and fashion being two popular and gendered examples. Women, specifically, perform "aspirational labor" in which they pursue their dream careers, yet remain deeply embedded in consumer culture, subconsciously adopting problematic economic and industry practices as they

build a commercially viable personal brand (p. 49). These economic and ideological

relations exist at the site of the individual's labor, as platforms privilege a certain kind of

entrepreneurial subjectivity rendered intelligible to larger market logics.

The interplay between the visual aspects of a site and the personality of the

influencer often dictates the success of an individual influencer, yet these dynamics are

inscribed by the same gendered and racialized forces that impact success in the offline

world. Marwick (2013) argues that the rise of self-branding on social media has only

perpetuated class, race, and gender inequality, specifically because self-entrepreneurial

practices elide the privileges and benefits that accompany one's subject position. She

asserts that digital spaces, once envisioned as democratizing, have instead become a site

of racist and sexist behaviors. This dynamic is further obscured by a subtle, yet constant

push to position the individual as a site where economic and cultural concerns converge

(Duffy, 2015; Scolere, Pruchniewska & Duffy, 2018).

Although it is true that digital spaces often replicate and exacerbate a slew of

problematic behaviors, racial identity presents unique challenges in the work of

influencing. Black influencers must navigate additional racial histories and tensions to

'compensate' for their Blackness. For the target ideal of young, white women, a focus on

personality and likability is sufficient to be a successful influencer. For Black influencers,

however, personality alone is not sufficient to attain success; in addition to managing

their personae and overall presence on these platforms, they also need to 'lean in' to their

racial identity in order to appeal to potential followers looking to diversify their feed and

to attract brand partners looking to capitalize on Black markets (Sobande, 2017; Tate,

2016). In essence, Black female content creators must also consider which products and brands 'make sense' for them to market as Black women in order to safely and more smoothly enter this sphere of digital labor.

The ideal avatars of influencer work are young, white, wealthy women (Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Scolere, Pruchniewska & Duffy, 2018). This worker profile ensures that the laborer in question has the time and resources to dedicate solely to the execution of their dream job. As a result, historically marginalized communities are not imagined as viable subjects, but neoliberal logic is, ironically, not one to discriminate: In order to maximize innovation, ensure economic growth, and encourage competition, all available workers must be able to participate in the market (Coates, 2004; Gilbert, 2016; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010). Without the resources to pursue neoliberalized digital labor, Black individuals must buy into the familiar "bootstrap" mentality, one that assures them that financial success on digital platforms is attainable (Gilbert, 2016; Goldberg, 2009; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010; Szeman, 2015). As women are offered non-traditional, 'empowering' forms of work which allegedly erase gender norms, so does neoliberal labor promise Black communities an alternative career path where the history and reality of systemic racism cannot follow them (Gilbert, 2016; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010). The promise that digital labor offers a way out of generational poverty and discrimination is a clever way to mask the ways individualized, precarious labor poses the greatest risk to those same communities (Coates, 2004; Goldberg, 2009). Those who succeed publicly and financially are propped up as examples that *anyone* can make it within this American meritocracy (Coates, 2004; Gilbert, 2016; Goldberg, 2009).

Precarity, Post-feminism, and the Neoliberal Work of Influencing

The precarity that characterizes post-feminist and neoliberalized work accentuates class difference, even as neoliberal discourses promise ways to circumvent systemic gender, class, and racial discrimination. In neoliberal work, there is increasing instability and insecurity. Although digital labor (e.g. being an influencer) is positioned as an empowering choice that upsets normative gender roles by offering women the ability to work as self-made entrepreneurs, a lack of workplace protections pose other issues (Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008; Gilbert, 2016; Gill & Scharff). Furthermore, lower class individuals are often treated as having untapped entrepreneurial potential. State welfare programs are rolled back under the assumption that, given the optimal conditions and left only to their own devices, lower class individuals will have no choice but to lift themselves from poverty by participating fully in the market, pursuing strategies of entrepreneurship (Gilbert, 2016; Goldberg, 2009; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010; Szeman, 2015). Neoliberalism promises the opportunity to develop and exercise digital skills without having to worry about 'traditional' labor constraints (Gilbert, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Szeman, 2015). As such, individuals are told to be grateful for inhabiting a largely unregulated capitalist market, leaving no reason to imagine alternative social futures for themselves or others.

The notion of the "intersectional Internet" – (a term for examining how power is imprinted on and shapes digital technologies, particularly with regard to identity) – is also a useful and productive tool for understanding how race, gender, and class are stratified within digital labor (Daniels, 2015, p. 28; Noble & Tynes, 2016). Scholars studying

digital feminism note that intersectionality is prevalent in white feminist discourses online and operates as a popular buzz word for initiating conversations about gender that also acknowledge race (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Daniels, 2015; Love, 2019; Williams, 2015). However, some scholars assert that, as well-meaning as it may be, intersectional feminism does not necessarily grapple with or acknowledge the reality Black feminists and influencers face online (Connelly, 2015; Sobande, 2017; Williams, 2015). Scholars examine the contradiction in positing intersectionality as an integral part of feminism that includes the experiences of Black women but fails to consider how Black women navigate other spheres of life or how racial discrimination is perpetuated in digital spaces (Daniels; 2015; Williams, 2015).

A focus on intersectionality has become more prevalent in the literature on neoliberalism and scholars have begun to pinpoint how discriminatory digital labor practices traverse particular identities. However, scholarship on neoliberalism and the work of influencers have historically been kept separate from one another, save for literature on feminist social media accounts (Baer, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Pruchniewska, 2018). The appropriation of multicultural discourses further posits marginalized groups as desirable participants in the market, but falsely promises safety from race-based discrimination. Bringing together the literature on digital feminism and the work on racialized neoliberal labor provides critical context to examine how Black female influencers navigate influencing work. Gill and Scharff's (2013) work on the commodification of the feminine body in influencing work coupled with Brock (2020) and Gilbert's (2016) mapping of racialization in labor

provides a useful language to articulate the experience of Black female influencers, and thus, the body.

The Unique Case of Black Influencers

Caught at the intersection commodification, respectability politics, and venture labor, Black influencers are precariously positioned in influencing work that renders them and their bodies subject to greater scrutiny among brands and digital users. In particular, venture labor is characterized by investment, defined largely by the "time, energy, human capital, and other personal resources" that employees create through their labor (Neff, 2012, p. 16). Where venture labor becomes particularly precarious is through the "explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by nonentrepreneurs," or what Duffy (2015) describes as the way amateurs internalize competitive, enterprising logics and adopt entrepreneurial subjectivities. In venture labor, the subject becomes the commodity in which their self-investment becomes a measure by which they can attain financial and material success.

Examining how Black influencers navigate the complexities of digital labor and racial commodification not only reveals the mechanisms by which entrepreneurial subjectivities are created, but also makes legible how race and gender are co-constructed alongside one another. Scholars have noted Black influencers who operate as Instagram models and beauty vloggers shed light on the intersections of race and gender in influencing work (Hobson, 2016; Sobande, 2017; Tate, 2016). Of the Black influencers partnering with companies in the beauty industry, many have been able to break through exclusionary barriers by promoting natural hair health and beauty products. The politics

of natural hair are fraught because it is uniquely raced, gendered, and strictly regulated in American society, and by extension, so is the beauty of Black women (Danquah, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Walker, 2000). Still, many Black influencers have found success promoting the inclusion of natural hair in normative beauty standards, normalizing Black hair care products and practices while driving primarily Black audiences and followers to responsible, ethically sourced, socially conscious, and Black-owned businesses to do so (Hobson, 2016; Tate, 2016).

The regulation of natural hair operates as an illustrative example of racialization, rendering the subject of natural hair a political issue regardless of its normalcy for Black communities. Scholars note that although beauty vloggers focusing on hair may not be immediately categorized as political, for Black female influencers, focusing on natural hair care lends an inherent political dimension to texts they produce (Hobson, 2016; Sobande, 2017; Tate, 2016). Similarly, influencers who target Black audiences have been framed as political, even if the products and services marketed are not necessarily related to Black culture and experiences (Brock, 2020; Buccitelli, 2017). In this way, influencers who produce content relating to various elements of Black culture and aesthetic or aimed at Black audiences are often considered political.

Yet, influencers' focus on Black issues and culture has fostered some disagreement among scholars. Those who view an emphasis on Black culture and identity as necessarily political and activist in nature often stand in contrast to those who push for understanding Black identity outside of a fundamentally political context (Brock, 2020; Buccitelli, 2017; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013). Brock (2020) and Danquah (2011)

assert that the Black body has historically been understood and made legible largely in relationship to whiteness, and that the affordances and libidinal economies of social media amplify and exacerbate this dynamic. Other scholars view Black identity as an inherently political project precisely because it has been 'made to mean' relative to white identity and normative notions of class and gender (Jackson, 2016; Love, 2019; Spillers, 1987). For instance, Danquah (2011) notes the sheer presence of "Black" as a precursor to everyday descriptors: *Black* students, *Black* girls, *Black* professionals. However, Brock's (2020) book *Distributed Blackness* and Gallego's (2016) intimate exploratory piece both work to de-center the prevailing notion that Black communities are best understood in terms of racism's lengthy and complex history; rather, Black communities ought to be understood on their own terms, by examining their daily, lived practices which now extend to their use of and participation in new media technologies and digital platforms—in short, how the totality of Black life is experienced online in all its vagaries, joys, and contradictions. In the words of Charles Mills: "Race can be […] existential without being essential, shaping one's being without being one's shape" (Mills, 1998, xiv).

Influencing is largely discussed in terms of the neoliberal logics that undergird it as a mode of digital labor and its inherently commercial context. Although recognizing how influencing commodifies the self and the body is discursively useful for understanding the way capitalism exploits identity, this body of scholarship also frames digital Black experience in explicitly commercial or political terms. Indeed, Black influencers are often examined in terms of how their racial identity necessarily gives their

content political valence. Even natural hair beauty vloggers are framed in terms of 'natural hair politics.'

Through interviews with Black influencers and analyses of public discussions around race and labor in digital contexts, my study explores the tension between political notions of racial identity and understandings of Black identity that do not aspire to an overt political project. Given this framing, the literature on the performance of identity is extremely useful as it provides a language that makes intelligible the intricacies of how Black women negotiate influencing online (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013). That said, the arguments regarding race and performativity tend to focus on Twitter as the prime exemplar of how racialization occurs online. For Mooney (2018), Brock (2012), Sharma (2013), and Florini (2014), the circulation of hashtags on Twitter (e.g. Blacktags) reflects the performative nature of both race and identity. Although Twitter and Tumblr are similarly discursive, little attention has been paid to #BlackTumblr which, as part of Tumblr's microblogging platform, offers users longform modes of expression compared to Twitter's short-form tweets with imposed character limits.

Yet, influencers have found a home for themselves on Instagram and YouTube, which are much more visually oriented platforms. As part of meeting and managing expectations in the competitive realm of influencing, not only do Black influencers have to consider the way they craft and perform their respective personae, but they must also appear authentic while doing so (Hobson, 2016; Noakes, 2019; Sobande, 2017). The role of authenticity is critical in influencing work, and visual identity performance reaffirms

the extent to which an influencer appears as such. The visual performance of identity

plays an integral role in how I tease apart the discourses at work when examining how

Black influencers promote themselves and manage their personae, especially with regard

to racial identity on digital platforms.

Defining the Black Influencer

The term "influencer" has been understood as an individual who partners with

brands or companies and endorses their products or services which influencers then

market to their base of followers, increasing sales for the brand in question (Duffy, 2015;

Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2013). This is the definition used to describe

what influencing work looks like, but it is inadequate to describe the work that Black

influencers are doing on digital platforms. Rather than define "Black influencers" as

social media laborers who happen to be Black, the conceptualization I use in this project

instead refers to influencers who are Black and who produce content aimed specifically at

or curated for Black communities and audiences, a feature that stems largely from Tate's

(2016) definition of influencer and Brock's (2020) argument that part of characteristically

"influencer-esque" work includes collective forms of daily, lived experiences (e.g. beauty

vloggers that focus on natural hair).

To reiterate, my understanding of Black influencers is fundamentally one in

which those influencers explicitly recognize Black identity as part of their self-

promotional strategies, content, or audiences. Scholars who use similar

conceptualizations have noted the presence of love and openness in their media messages

as an alternative to self-improvement discourses often present in influencer content

regardless of field, industry, or topic (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Kanai, 2018; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Tate, 2016). For instance, the practice of Black beauty vloggers endorsing natural hair care products and tutorials offer Black audiences a chance to engage with their normal daily routines in a space made for them by someone who looks like them. By cultivating shared spaces focused on daily aspects of Black life and culture, Black influencers offer collective identity building spaces while normalizing Black cultural practices for Black communities in a way that other influencers and web personalities do not or cannot (Hobson, 2016; Sobande, 2017; Tate, 2016). In other words, Black influencers are able to offer something to Black communities that they cannot readily find elsewhere, namely wrestling with racial injustice even as they are invited to participate in traditional modes of consumption.

A significant part of the scholarship on racialization online examines the obstacles, harassment, and exploitation Black women face online, echoing Malcolm X's assertion that "[t]he most disrespected person in America is the Black woman" in the digital era. Scholars have noted that literature on the digital divide has a tendency to make disproportionate efforts lamenting Black women's lack of access to technology, but seldom recognizes the myriad of ways in which they have utilized digital tools to create space for themselves (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Love, 2019; Noakes, 2019). In particular, Black women have used news groups, discussion forums, and Facebook groups to "articulate their [own] versions of Black womanhood," hosting conversations that normally "would have taken place in beauty salons or other gendered spaces" and moving them to more publicly visible digital spaces (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010, p.

1040). Hashtag activism is one such practice that has been particularly useful for Black women, and the virtual communities that have arisen as a result allow them to convene with each other and engage their shared experiences (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Love, 2019; Williams, 2015).

As part of their online community-building, Black women have organized mass movements onto YouTube, Instagram, and other social media. These women have leveraged digital platforms to render themselves and the unique issues they face in more publicly visible ways (Hobson, 2016; Noakes, 2019; Sobande, 2017). For instance, Black women have carved a space for themselves in digital beauty markets (i.e. as beauty vloggers). In addition to normalizing natural hair through influencing work, Black women have similarly taken to digital artwork, producing artistic pieces which adopt unconventional aesthetics to represent Black womanhood which they subsequently circulate on Instagram and Tumblr (Noakes, 2019). The combination of Black women's self-driven integration in spheres of digital labor and content creation and their use of hashtag activism populates conversations within the literature regarding the intersection of commodification and activism. Even as Black women endeavor to increase their visibility online, the very affordances of the platforms they utilize often prioritize other content (Noakes, 2019; Noble, 2013; Sobande, Fearfull & Brownlie, 2019). Thus, the appropriation of Black women's cultural and technical capital is a logical next point of entrée into understanding racialization and digital culture. Before that can be discussed, however, how particular platforms lend themselves to these subversive practices and endeavors must first be examined.

Social Media Platforms as Critical Discursive Spaces

Although there are numerous social media platforms where the tensions between racialization and digital technologies are popularly discussed, certain platforms lend themselves well to examining race and racialization online. Of the myriad social media that center discussions of race, Tumblr exists as an incredibly discursive space where shared meaning is often produced by communities held together by collective, progressive ideological commitments discussed through a unique commenting and posting structure that allows arguments build on one another. Indeed, scholars have noted how Tumblr's discursive affordances let it exist as a unique kind of political platform where users can engage in long-form, intellectual debates as a kind of educational political praxis (Hartl Majcher, 2017; James, 2015; McCracken, 2017). Tumblr is home to subcultures who use this blogging platform to better engage with their respective communities and its semi-private, anonymous nature, coupled with its tagging and blogging features make it an excellent space for critical discourse to flourish in communities (Connelly, 2015; Hartl Majcher, 2017; James, 2015; Korn, 2019; McCracken, 2017).

As such, Tumblr is a space in which cultural and political dimensions of social issues intersects with critical identity work where users collectively negotiate meanings in publicly visible ways (Granshaw, 2014). Because users on this site regularly engage in longform discussions about identity, its political valence, and actively advocate for more equitable means of accessing information on these subjects, examining discussions about Black influencers on Tumblr provides rich, illustrative insights about the discourses that

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color those conversations. Such an analysis also highlights the specific and emergent

strains of discourse that set the terms for Black influencing as an identity-based practice

connected to larger debates about Black culture and identity online.

Social issues are a subject of frequent and intense discussion on Tumblr, and

some researchers have traced the trajectory of social justice issues and media

controversies (e.g. #GamerGate and The Fappening) across the platform for its unique

combination of affordances and its tendency to host activist communities (Adair &

Nakamura, 2017; Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Korn, 2019). Within Tumblr,

users work as active and participatory groups who swap ideological beliefs supplemented

with academic research and personal experience alike. For instance, Adair and Nakamura

(2017) tracked discussions of the book *The Bridge Called My Back* across Tumblr, which

hosts a collection of feminist essays promoting 'vernacular pedagogy' to make alternative

notions of education accessible while challenging neoliberal ideas about what 'proper'

scholarship and academic practice look like. Here, critical conversations about

legitimizing experiential knowledge flourished decades after the book's initial release.

Tumblr exists as an illuminating example of how ideas circulate and critical

conversations catch fire in ways often found in academic spheres but whose users instead

adopt a more localized, grassroots approach to educating Internet audiences on social

issues. In turn, active users do the work of spotlighting the marginalized voices who need

it most. McCracken (2017) explores how the platform encourages the "formation of

counterpublic spaces for marginalized millennial communities and progressives"

(colloquially, and sometimes derisively, referred to as 'social justice warriors' in popular

discourse) who prioritize activism and more equitable flows of information (p. 151). Tumblr's architecture, McCracken (2017) argues, collapses social hierarchies, an affordance that helps push marginalized voices to the forefront of discussions on the site. Moreover, Tumblr's reblogging feature allows arguments to visually and logically build on one other through each user's addition, circulating as one long post containing the chronological record of debate and discussion (Hartl Majcher, 2017; James, 2015; McCracken, 2017).

Because of its anonymous nature coupled with its particularly discursive affordances, Tumblr is a space well-suited for niche groups and communities to come together as interpretive communities. A noteworthy portion of Tumblr literature focuses on the dynamics of fandom and examines the site as a place where fan communities can easily cohere, share texts, and collectively engage in the kinds of meaning making practices that provide a foundation for the fandom in question. Some of this work recognizes the politically charged elements of fandom as expressed on Tumblr, such as criticisms of whitewashing in beloved films and books, race and gender bent characters, and the creation of more representative characters and storylines through fanfiction and fan art (Chew, 2018; Granshaw, 2014). Granshaw (2014) asserts that rich conversations thrive because the platform's affordances and semi-private nature actually "minimize […] trolling and bullying" (p. 21). Consequently, fan communities engage in a more targeted, analytical way relative to the circulation of these texts which often prompt long threads of rich conversation and debate about representation.

In particular, Tumblr's racial affordances encourage users to engage arguments and information in ways that build on one another. Moreover, the site's anonymizing features better suit Black women working within this space, limiting the kind of precarity associated with hypervisibility on more publicly visible platforms like Twitter and Instagram. For Black women working as cultural critics, Tumblr provides a space for them to freely engage Black feminist thought with fewer concerns about trolling, doxing, and other harmful behaviors. While my participants noted that there are still toxic people active on the platform who sometimes go off the rails on their post, several of them seemed to find solace in the idea that they feel more protected on the platform.

A prevalent theme among Tumblr scholarship addresses the presence of feminism, feminist discourse, and gender activism across the platform. The literature explores how young women are first introduced to feminist ideals through social media and the role that Tumblr, specifically, plays in educating women about what it means and looks like to be a feminist (Connelly, 2015; Heffernan, 2018; Kim & Ringrose, 2018). This work takes a critical look at slacktivism and hashtag activism on the platform and critiques Tumblr's affordances in its ability to foster communities and provide a meaningful path to collective action. Such examination relates to some of the previous literature which explores hashtag activism, specifically how Black women exercise this mode of resistance in online contexts (Love, 2019; Williams, 2015). Likewise, trending is a critical component of digital activism and the types of feminist conversations that "trend" on Tumblr (e.g. feminist humor and memes, cancel culture, call out posts, etc.) have given researchers insight as to how identity is articulated and mobilized within the

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context of Tumblr's semi-private and anonymized space. Scholars studying digital activism assert that Tumblr exists as a unique space where women and other marginalized communities can engage their identity on their own terms (Guillard, 2016; Kim & Ringrose, 2018).

<center>Gaps, Limitations, and Useful Tools for the Following Study</center>

Although the separate bodies of literature charted here cannot fully account for the uniquely embodied and inherently commercialized work of Black influencers, there are a plethora of useful conceptual tools and rich historical frameworks that provide solid footing for my study. The literature on Black women's commodification illuminates processes of commercialization through its exploration of the voyeuristic gaze that has historically been fixated on Black women's bodies. Drawing on the lengthy history that has rendered Black women as cultural commodities to be ogled will enable me to better contextualize how Black female influencers navigate the love/hate dichotomy that has been forcibly impressed upon their bodies amid Instagram and YouTube's intensely visual platforms. Moreover, the literature critiquing the particular raced and gendered history of natural hair is incredibly salient to Black beauty vloggers whose content often prioritizes normalizing Black hair care, styles, and products. Using Collins (2005) and Danquah's (2011) framework for the sexualization of the Black feminine body helps articulate the kinds of body politicking that grew out of chattel slavery with precision, thus enabling me to properly situate Black influencing within its historical and cultural context.

The concept of "aspirational labor" is especially helpful in laying bare the neoliberal logics underlying digital platforms and influencing as a precarious form of venture labor (Duffy, 2015, p. 49). Although the literature about influencing as a mode of digital labor focuses largely on young, white women, the notion of Black excellence accounts for the racialization of labor under late-stage capitalism and provides a useful segue to unpack the raced and gendered subjectivities at play in Black entrepreneurship (Collins, 2005). Taken with the scholarship on Black women's fetishization, the literature which explores the gendered nature of influencing buttressed by post-feminist discourses about individual choice further contextualizes the unique brand of anti-Black capitalism in which minorities are encouraged to participate but seldom able to succeed. Neoliberalism's appropriation of multiculturalism and post-feminist discourses of empowerment work to pin racialized subjectivities to gendered forms of digital labor in this respect.

Likewise, the scholarship on race and digital culture offers some useful tools for analyzing how Black users negotiate racialized meaning using digital tools and platforms. In particular, "racial affordances" and digital performativity are integral to examining how Black influencers promote and position themselves on social media platforms and in relationship to their white counterparts who dominate many of the same spaces (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013, p. 114). However, much of this literature focuses on largely Twitter and cannot fully account for the profoundly visual nature of Instagram, or by extension, the visual nature of influencing itself. Although some of this work recognizes Instagram as a platform with unique affordances to be explored, limited

attention is paid to YouTube, another platform especially lucrative for beauty vloggers. Moreover, much of the literature about digital acts of appropriation focus on Black users whose work becomes commodified through site-specific affordances or brands operating on the same platform, but in the realm of Black influencing, commercialization *is* the context. Thus, the literature on influencing helps bridge the gap between non-commercial endeavors and inherently commodified performativity.

The notion that certain social media sites prioritize critical discursive engagement by virtue of their unique affordances is a compelling and useful one. The literature on Tumblr as a platform well suited to long form cultural conversations works well with Brock's (2012) conceptualization of how Black users leverage digital platforms to engage one another and educate audiences about issues facing Black communities. The site itself plays host to "technocultural discourses" where I can better examine how Black communities understand Black influencing by employing a more intimate, equitable approach (Brock, 2018, p. 2). Weaving together these disparate bodies of work foregrounds my study and adequately equips me with the tools to examine and evaluate how Black female influencers simultaneously navigate neoliberal conditions and histories of racism and commodification relative to self-promotional labor. The subsequent chapters map the rich albeit varied theoretical framework I employ throughout my data collection and analytical processes to better understand and articulate the experiences of Black female influencers.

Research Questions

Given the limitations concerning the lack of attention paid to Black female influencers in influencing scholarship coupled with the unique context of the George Floyd protests during which following Black influencers was hailed as an actionable solution to supporting Black communities, my particular study examines how Black female influencers navigate the commercial terrain of influencing and digital labor in markedly different ways than their white counterparts. To explore these tensions, my research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do neoliberal conditions and histories of commodification shape the way Black influencers promote themselves and their content *vis a vis* influencing?

RQ2: How is the Black feminine body positioned, understood, and debated in the social media spaces where influencing also happens?

RQ3: How do Black influencers understand their own relationship to racial justice and platform economies within the context of digital labor?

RQ4: How does popular press coverage of Black influencers make claims about how Black individuals can and should navigate the realm of digital labor and influencer work? How does popular press coverage of Black issues connect influencer labor to the politics of a given cultural moment?

To fully address these questions, I identified theoretical tools and perspectives that clearly map the way technologies themselves are 'raced' and the way subjects internalize neoliberal logics that invite self-commodification. Moreover, these tools acknowledge the visual and discursive capabilities of digital platforms. Because

#BlackTumblr has been largely overlooked by the literature about race, performance, and discourse, I examine the platform and the corresponding tag in my study to investigate how Black communities discuss Black influencing and digital labor on their own terms. I also analyze influencer content sampled from Instagram and YouTube because these are the platforms most associated with influencing work due to their monetization and visual-orientation. Most of the influencers I interviewed have a multi-platform presence, but for almost all of them Instagram or YouTube is their primary platform (i.e. their preferred platform where they produce most of their content and/or secure the most brand partnerships). Because the literature about influencing focuses on 'conventional' forms of this type of labor (e.g. Instagram modeling and beauty vlogging), analyzing content from both platforms provides insight as to how Black influencers' work and experiences stack up against their white counterparts in a recognizably 'influencer-esque' setting.

CHAPTER 3

THEORIZING RACIALIZED DISCOURSE

To better contextualize the experiences of Black female influencers, I employ

conceptual tools drawn from the literature on racialized subjectivities, neoliberal logics

undergirding venture labor, and how race itself is embedded in digital technologies and

platforms. Neoliberal governmentality, or rationality, provides the theoretical framework

in which this multimodal critical discourse analysis is grounded, examining how

capitalist interpretations of selfhood and creative labor necessarily inform the way Black

female content creators perceive themselves and the platforms where they work.

Specifically, the "technologies of race" coupled with the use of racialized technocultural

discourses reveal how race is used both as a tool of oppression and empowerment under

neoliberal capitalism, providing the context in which to examine the way Black women's

labor have been exploited historically and through new modes of digital labor (Brock,

2018; Higginbotham, 1992, p. 252).

Technologies of Race

Understanding how racialization occurs online necessitates an understanding of

how digital tools are creatively used and co-opted by marginalized communities in ways

that afford them agency on platforms. Some scholars look explicitly at the "technologies

of race," or, how race is built into digital tools that are, in turn, used to perform a

particular racial identity or to rally an entire community (De Lauretis, 1987; Foucault,

1980; Hammonds, 1997; Higginbotham, 1992, p. 252). Scholars assert that within digital

society, ideas about race become embedded in the tools of online platforms and their

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users. In this context, what we know about Black identity is not only performative in the traditional sense but has been created through the individual and collective use of digital tools (Brock, 2020; Buccitelli, 2017; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013). Brock (2020) and Buccitelli (2017) note that "Black digital practice" has become increasingly more visible to white audiences through digital platforms where Black users foster online communities through the circulation of memes and utilize social media to engage in anti-racist activism (p. 17). Similarly, Nakamura and Chow-White (2013) argue that race itself has become digitized, popular and public imaginaries surrounding race now embedded in a fundamentally digital context. Because these scholars conceptualize race *as* technology, the racialization of performance becomes digital.

Because of race's performative nature in digital spaces, platform-based tools and features can also be easily co-opted. For example, Mooney (2018) examines the "carefree Black girl" social media subject, a hashtag representative of a particular racialized and gendered understanding of young, Black, female social media users. The tag is most popular on Twitter and Instagram. Scholars working on similar projects argue that #carefreeblackgirl has become a form of narrative identity for young Black women, enabling them to share narratives which challenge racist stereotypes, yet are ultimately commodified by other social media sites and industry practices (Mooney, 2018; Sobande, Fearfull & Brownlie, 2019; Williams, 2015). Williams (2015) similarly examines Black women's use of hashtag activism to perform and negotiate their identities amidst feminist discourses circulating online. While hashtag activism has been equated with 'slacktivism' as lacking in political valence and meaningful action, Black women have been adopting

these tools to increase their visibility on their own terms (Hobson, 2016; Noble, 2013; Noakes, 2019; Sobande, Fearfull & Brownlie, 2019). The digital spaces in which racialized subjectivities and discourses are enacted and circulated become both a site of resistance in challenging racial stereotypes and hierarchies, yet also one of commodification. Digital tools – such as hashtags – allow marginalized groups to create, shape, and circulate narratives about issues facing their communities. However, the popular currency of hashtags (i.e. their ability to 'trend') make it easy for corporations, competing voices, and users with larger followings to access, use, and distribute the tag in question, spotlighting their own voices at the expense of the initial group (Hobson, 2016; Noble, 2013; Williams, 2015).

In addition to appropriating digital tools toward commercial ends, the commodification of race and labor can occur through a site's unique affordances. Nakamura and Chow-White's (2013) concept of "racial affordances" similarly operates as a technology of race, providing a way to map how digital platforms enable and privilege particular expressions of racialized identity (p. 114). In the same way that a highway's racial affordances enable white suburban dwellers to bypass Black business districts, a digital platform's racial affordances can enable or disable certain expressions of racialized identity privileged by a site's unique technological features. Black influencers must subsequently navigate the way visually oriented platforms like Instagram work to commodify the Black feminine body. Due to its digital and commercial context, technologies of race are particularly evident in Black influencing as

they fundamentally shape the way Black women are encouraged to engage and express their own racial identity online.

<center>Technocultural Discourses Online</center>

Many scholars have noted how the Internet affords Black communities the ability to circulate, negotiate, and build out their racial identities in ways not possible through other mediums and spaces (Brock, 2020; Buccitelli, 2017; Nakamura, 2013). In terms of methodology, many of these scholars have asserted that conducting discourse analysis is a critical way to make sense of racialized practices by virtue of the Internet's multifaceted and networked capabilities which facilitate a complex rendering of racialized identities (Brock, 2018; Buccitelli, 2017). Brock (2018) asserts that culture and technology have become inextricable from one another, and racialization can be mapped through "technocultural discourses" (p. 2). Technocultural discourses refer to the way communities (e.g. Black communities) produce discursive and experiential conceptions of race on their own terms, allowing for a more equitable, bottom-up approach to studying race in digital spaces. Rather than focusing solely on the overtly political dimensions and negotiations of Black identity, scholars also highlight the daily, lived practices associated with Black communities which have found a home on digital platforms (e.g. hair tutorials, dance videos, etc.) (Brock, 2020; Buccitelli, 2017). In this respect, digital spaces operate as an extension of collective Black spaces. Brock's (2018) approach to studying race online is particularly useful in my analysis of conversations about race and digital labor on Tumblr in which I examine the way Black communities

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make sense of Black influencing and its implications for the Black women laboring on digital platforms.

Tumblr operates as a platform especially conducive to technocultural discourses where issues such as gender and racial justice can be collectively explored and critiqued. Part of the academic conversations regarding Tumblr consider the prevalence of digital white feminism across social media platforms. Scholars note that trending feminism and feminist blogs, Instagram accounts, and YouTube channels primarily focus on white versions of feminism (Adair & Nakamura, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Daniels, 2015). Indeed, many feminist accounts and channels are run by young middle and upper-class white women. That said, many of these influencers try to be mindful of the varying aspects of identity at play within feminism's frame, resulting in what some scholars term the "intersectional Internet" (Daniels, 2015, p. 28). Scholars caution the potential for white feminism to be taken as the dominant form of feminism online, or to be positioned as the preferred way to practice feminist principles in one's life. Researchers assert that the prevailing version of white feminism can overshadow Black women's voices occupying similar spaces in conversations about race and gender on social media (Adair & Nakamura, 2017; Love, 2019; Williams, 2015).

Other scholars and cultural critics have troubled intersectionality itself, citing the lack of a more precise definition lends itself to misuse in academic and popular discussions (Nash, 2017). In particular, Nash (2008) identifies Black women as the "quintessential intersectional subjects," more an issue with how intersectionality is deployed as a methodology than with the concept itself, and asserts the need to expand

the term into include other individuals, experiences, and uniquely layered identities. As the intersectional Internet continues to prioritize white feminism and its interpretation of Black women, my study necessarily examines the way intersectionality is invoked in the media discourse and Tumblr conversations about Black influencing.

In terms of what technocultural discourses yield, educational and political praxis on Tumblr can be conceptualized as a form of digital labor. Scholars have long noted how the work Black women do in order to make strides in the realm of racial, gender, and sexual equality are often co-opted or undermined by white feminists. Similar instances occur online when Black women's ideas and experiences with race, gender, and other intersectional inequities are pointed to by white feminists online without properly crediting and highlighting Black women themselves (Adair & Nakamura, 2017; Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Sobande, Fearfull & Brownlie, 2019). The appropriation of Black women's digital labor is a critical dimension of the experience of being a Black feminist, activist, and even influencer online (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Noakes, 2019). The co-optation of digital practices, tools, verbiage, and experiences are all part of an activist-oriented social media ecology. The fact that culture and politics are foundational to a subgroup of Black influencers navigating the dynamics of social media is the very crux of identity, politics, and digital labor my particular study investigates.

In addition to being a space where feminists and Black activists can engage ideas and each other, Tumblr also provides a home for other historically marginalized communities. Scholars have explored how Tumblr appeals to LGBTQ+ communities with some scholarship specifically looking at transgender communities on the site, noting

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the tagging practices that abound on the platform provide a simple, non-descript way of managing new and more fluid forms of gender identity performance and exploration (Dame, 2016; Haimson, O. L., Dame-Griff, A., Capello, E., & Richter, 2019). On Tumblr, identity performance becomes a more open and viable mode of existence given the site's affordances and semi-private, anonymous nature. Although unique struggles and experiences differ, users are also free to have a more expressive and embodied engagement with their identity by virtue of the platform itself, much in line with Nakamura and Chow-White's (2013) conception of racial affordances on Twitter and Instagram. The affordances of Tumblr make addressing the unique, lived, experiential dimensions of racial discrimination a more accessible endeavor for users looking to engage in meaningful discussion, political activism, or other collective and relational practices. Not only do the affordances of the site itself allow for kinds of play and identity work to take place, but the culture of the site itself invites discussion and critique among users engaged in crucial identity work (Korn, 2019; Prskalo, 2019; Sender & Shaw, 2017).

Amid the users all vying to have their voices heard and circulated on endlessly reblogged posts, a sort of community of Black content creators has also found footing on Tumblr. Blogs geared explicitly toward understanding Black issues and working to educate larger Tumblr communities have become incredibly pervasive on the platform. In the same way Instagram and YouTube influencers exist, so too do Tumblr content creators. Although they are not termed as such, scholarship on feminist Tumblr accounts adopts similar frames for examining such accounts as scholars studying influencers on

more 'conventional' or 'expected' platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Connelly, 2015; Kim & Ringrose, 2018). Although they do not receive compensation through brand deals or endorsements, the users running such Tumblr accounts gain currency by way of cultural capital (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010). These 'brands' or blogs, however, are implicitly political in that they overtly address issues facing the Black community in the United States. Returning to the idea of digital feminisms, Black feminism finds its digital footing here. White feminism is hotly debated and critiqued on Tumblr, and the active inclusions of other feminist frameworks underscores many of the cultural conversations taking place on the site (Adair & Nakamura, 2017). In other words, Tumblr exists as a space where Black feminism can get to work.

<center>Neoliberal Governmentality</center>

Theoretically speaking, the intersections of race and digital labor can be understood within the broader logics of neoliberal governmentality, particularly the ways neoliberal ideologies manifest in the lives of individuals. Neoliberalism is not solely a set of economic policies; rather, it also operates in accordance with the Foucauldian concept of "political rationality," a normative, organizing principle that pervades social and political spheres (Foucault, 2008). Governmentality works as a structuring rationality which encourages subjects to regulate their own labor along a particular ideological ethos, a conceptual tool especially suitable to my project in mapping the individualized labor of influencing work (Foucault, 2008). Specifically, neoliberal governmentality refers to the self-imposed pressures individuals take upon themselves to operate as ideal citizens and consumers under neoliberal governance's privileging of the market

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(Hamann, 2009; Szeman, 2015). The work of influencing relies on neoliberal notions of

capital, labor, and consumption, all of which have become embedded in the very digital

platforms where influencers thrive.

Within analyses of digital labor, neoliberal governmentality plays a critical role in

the construction of entrepreneurial subjectivities. Under neoliberalism, subjects have

become their own capital, their labor commodified (Foucault, 1980). This is further

compounded by the rise of *homo economicus* as a quantified and conceptualized form of

subjectivity; within discussions of humans as economic agents, *homo economicus* comes

to stand for the idea that individuals' sole motivations or aspirations are economic ones,

symbolizing a pervasive field of discourse that works through various milieus to

constitute humans as primarily economic beings, often to the exclusion of other, more

publicly oriented formulations (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 1980). Because subjects intuit

market dynamics in nearly all aspects of life, consumption and entrepreneurship become

an exercise in citizenship, offering the primary means for engaging in public culture.

Citizens (or consumers) internalize market logics and monitor themselves accordingly,

prioritizing productivity and self-made progress in work and life as the appropriate path

to responsible citizenship. In essence, being a good citizen and by extension, a good

person, is defined in terms of labor, capital, and consumption.

These structuring logics permeate notions of work and life in ways that privilege

difficult forms of labor that offer limited protections for workers. In a neoliberal state,

entrepreneurship is a commonsense way of navigating the "inevitable […] reality of

global capitalism" (Szeman, 2015, p. 473). This sensibility shapes political and cultural

life, making the entrepreneur an ideal iteration of the neoliberal subject. Influencers are particularly attractive neoliberal subjects because they embody the ideals of entrepreneurial individuality. Influencing's emphasis on individual personality, the necessity of developing skillsets to effectively leverage social media platforms, and employing aggressive self-promotional tactics to build a personal brand and grow a following, all ideologically situate influencing as the ideal, neoliberal career. To be an influencer is to embody the essence of neoliberal governmentality, in which the uniquely adept individual might break through the digital glass ceiling to make it as a "micro-celebrity" on the Internet (Marwick, 2013).

Because neoliberal governmentality attempts to erase society by dismantling social and economic protections, risk becomes a "universal condition of existence" which props up the narrative that everyone must become an entrepreneur to take matters into their own hands (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 2013; Neff, 2012; Szeman, 2015, p. 475). Neoliberal logics assert that with risk comes profitable rewards. In this way, governing rationalities stipulate a working environment that offers little to no protection for individuals expected to engage in high-stakes practices and decision-making as a necessary part of finding their place within society (i.e. within privatized labor markets). Under neoliberal governmentality, individuals are encouraged to engage in venture labor, to "think of their jobs as an investment" in both themselves and their future as a marketable subject, rather than working solely for wages (Neff, 2012; p. 16). In creative industries, the risks associated with venture labor are assumed primarily by individuals; the dreams of aspirational labor obscure this dynamic and glamorize the 'do what you

love' mentality at the core of modern digital work, subsequently blurring the distinction between work and life until they are one and the same (McRobbie, 2018; Neff, 2012). The internalized sense of risk associated with neoliberal labor is a defining trait of influencing work whereby self-made entrepreneurs present the pinnacle of economic gain and personal fulfillment.

Subjects within a competitive, risk-laden system require minimal demands of the state while working endlessly to invent new opportunities for production and profit; thus, the system rewards innovation without protecting those who work to provide it. In this sense, risk becomes a classed issue where the wealthy can purchase safety from environmental, professional, and commercial dangers, yet lower classes have fewer options to evade the risks they must assume to participate in the labor market and a more broadly neoliberalized society (Beck, 1992). Consequently, risk perpetuates class distinctions rather than leveling them, producing what Giddens (2013) terms "environments of risk" which belie the inherently individualistic nature of neoliberal governmentality (p. 35). Therefore, masses of individuals are subject to different kinds of risk, thus exposing how these dangers are allotted along class and race lines, laying bare the lie that skill is the only measure by which individuals can be judged under this new age meritocracy (Giddens, 2013).

Moreover, entrepreneurial subjects are positioned as rational beings, yet neoliberal logics are so ingrained that subjects know the rules of the game without thinking about them (Dardot & Laval, 2014). This reasoning is reflected in scholars' focus on the presence of self-help discourses employed by influencers in which a focus

on self-improvement masks the slavish precarity of neoliberal entrepreneurial sentiments (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Kanai, 2018; Gill & Scharff, 2013). Subjects' knowledge is limited to what is useful in the market. In this way, market logics are accessible to individuals and underscored in these subjectivities, but no one fully grasps them due to ideological work that makes increasingly precarious labor relationships desirable (Dardot & Laval, 2014; Duffy, 2015; Giddens, 2013). As Foucault states, people may know what they do and why they do it, but seldom understand "what what they do does," demonstrating the pervasive nature of both industry and market logics in daily life (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 2014, p. 187). Accessible digital technologies provide individuals with the tools and opportunities to succeed in their endeavors; therefore, if we fail to become the successful digital entrepreneurs we strive to be, we have only ourselves to blame, especially within a discursive logic where creating the self is equated with creating a business (Gill & Scharff, 2013; Pruchniewska, 2018; Szeman, 2015).

Racial Neoliberalism and Subjectivities

Identities and individuals are at the core of neoliberalism's discursive practices. After all, influencers are self-employed. Yet, the resultant subjectivities are not totalizing; they have the potential to upend the perpetuation of precarious work and render visible the shortcomings exacerbated by digital platforms (Davies, 2016). Under neoliberalism, difference is tolerable insofar as it allows more subjects to compete within and invigorate the market (Gilbert, 2016; Hamann, 2009; Jones & Mukherjee, 2010). Because identity politics pose a threat in unmasking the inherent inequities of the system itself, public officials and private actors work to fold marginalized groups into the system by offering

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access to alternative forms of labor. Post-feminist discourses are especially successful in this regard; women are posited as ideal neoliberal subjects because individualized logics offer non-traditional means of extracting value from gendered labor usually excluded from the market. Consider, for example, single mothers who can easily engage in at-home labor on platforms like Etsy and Instagram without being excluded from the workplace because of their responsibilities as mothers (Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2013). By offering women alterative paths to careers more readily accessible to them, neoliberalism's structuring ethos ensures that any potential resistance (i.e. acknowledging the inherent discriminatory dimensions of neoliberal labor) is minimized due to the lucrative and seemingly inclusive options being offered. This threat is further managed by offering celebrity, status, and wealth to successful entrepreneurs, but this kind of success is becoming increasingly difficult, the dreamy façade of entrepreneurial achievement beginning to fade (Szeman. 2015).

Not everyone is able to participate equally in the individualized, neoliberal model of work, but that does not mean their participation is discouraged. Members of marginalized groups have less security in work, but also take up the most dangerous and precarious types of labor (Coates, 2004; Gilbert, 2016; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010). Neoliberal meritocracy obscures forms of racism in which some individuals are not able to engage in the market on equitable terms (e.g. immigrants). For example, occupying a liminal space, immigrants are free to engage in the precarious work afforded to marginalized populations, but their work is undervalued (Roberts & Mahtani, 2010). In this way, not everyone is able to adopt the subjectivities incentivized by neoliberal

rationality (Roberts & Mahtani, 2010). Unfortunately, entrepreneurial self-help

discourses are especially appealing to poor, Black, and migrant communities because

they offer supposedly 'equal' chances to compete for elite status (Gilbert, 2016). Yet

these populations are the ones most in need of protection and security as vulnerable

populations are exploited for their labor but never rewarded for their work. Under the

specific modes of "racist neoliberalism" found in the United States, the Black political

economy is hit particularly hard by neoliberal policies which deregulate the welfare state

and cut government jobs in which people of color are most likely to be working (Coates,

2004, p. 375; Gilbert, 2016).

Neoliberal policies and governmentality structure and produce racialized

subjectivities which become evident in the work of influencing (Coates, 2004; Gilbert,

2016; Goldberg, 2009; Jones & Mukherjee, 2010; Kapoor, 2013). Building on the history

of the appropriation of Black cultural aesthetics, blackfishing (the practice of

appropriating urban dialects, body shapes and hair textures associated with Black

individuals, and styles of dress to further one's own career and brand) is an illustrative

example of how racialized subjectivities operate. Blackfishing highlights what is

desirable about the Black subject and encourages individuals to leverage those traits to

further their own entrepreneurial endeavors (Stevens, 2021). Popularized Black aesthetics

and culture become commodities insofar as they provide an edgy advantage in the

competitive field of neoliberalized labor (Gilbert, 2016; Saha, 2018).

My approach, however, recognizes the complexities of racialized neoliberal

subjectivities and racism not solely as an outcome of neoliberal policies, but as a direct

influence on and outgrowth of those policies. I consider the fact that old issues have been mapped onto new media technologies; neoliberal subjectivities simply make them intelligible in new ways (Carvalho, 2008; Umoja Noble, 2018). For instance, the practice of blackfishing ultimately functions as an extension of historical acts of whitening urban spaces, allowing limited forms of Black identity to be visible in an otherwise lucrative market (Stevens, 2021). Similar principles can be applied to the realm of influencing work as well insofar as Black influencers continue to be perceived as producing specialty or niche content regardless of the fact that their content (e.g. makeup tutorials) is not inherently niche (Sobande, 2017; Tate, 2016). Instagram models who appropriate these aesthetics enjoy brand deals with major beauty companies while Black influencers continue to work primarily with Black beauty brands, resulting in their further marginalization (Hobson, 2016; Sobande, 2017). In essence, white Instagram models and beauty vloggers reap the benefits of mainstream access while Black influencers struggle to partner with major brands, reinscribing systemic racism through digital labor.

Rooted in histories of capital appropriation, neoliberalism permits brands and individuals alike to mine Black communities for their culture and labor in ways that maximize profits for the appropriator and further marginalize Black subjects. Neoliberal governmentality, specifically, constructs racialized subjects rendered intelligible primarily through commercial contexts, and influencing as a mode of neoliberal labor operates as a space in which Black female subjects must internalize the logic of 'self as commodity' in order to attain success. The concept of neoliberal governmentality aids my analysis of interviews with Black influencers, allowing me to fully unpack the logics

which work to reify Black subjectivity evidenced in the way Black influencers narrativize

their personal brand, professional journey, and relationship to the digital platforms where

they work. Similarly, examining the technocultural discourses about Black labor and

influencing on Tumblr necessitates a grassroots approach in understanding how Black

communities make sense of the precarious, gendered, and commercialized labor which

disproportionately affects them.

Coupled with racial affordances, these conceptual tools offer a robust and

multifaceted repertoire I can use to map how creative labor on digital platforms

encourages individuals to commodify themselves in the name of status and celebrity. The

exploitative nature of neoliberal logics and venture labor, however, have very different

implications for Black women. In as much as neoliberalism attempts to obscure the

reification of systemic racism in influencing, Black women experience the tangible

consequences of navigating an inherently commercial space where the (Black) body is

fundamentally positioned as a commodity, a reality I explore in the subsequent chapter.

Conclusion

Coupled with neoliberal governmentality, the conceptual tools which operate as

technologies of race make intelligible the way race is embedded in the digital platforms

where influencing happens (e.g. Instagram and YouTube). Racialized subjectivities

similarly reveal how Black subjects internalize neoliberal logics in pursuit of celebrity,

security, and personal fulfillment. Because digital technologies make venture labor more

accessible through monetized, easy-to-use platforms, minority groups are better able to

take up various modes of digital labor. Taken together, technologies of race and neoliberal

governmentality demonstrate how Black subjects are subject to systemic capitalist pressures to perform and produce, yet also carve space for themselves to provide connection, support, and education. The bottom-up approach associated with technocultural discourses is especially useful insofar as Black influencers' approach to their work is distinct from their white counterparts; because they do not internalize neoliberal logics in the same way, Black influencers challenge the competitive dimension of venture labor that instructs individuals to prioritize their own self-interest at the expense of others.

Although the theoretical perspectives about neoliberal logics, competition, and racialized technologies are useful for understanding the context in which Black influencers work, they do not explicitly or meaningfully articulate how race and gender are simultaneously hailed within this commercial space. The very notion of racial performativity is rooted in the idea that the body is necessarily obscured by the digital medium, but the body is *the* integral site of influencing work. For Black women, their bodies are not only marked and sexualized but are also the commodity they are expected to leverage in order to succeed as an influencer. The innately embodied, racialized, and gendered nature of Black influencing is thus an element of digital labor that is largely overlooked.

CHAPTER 4

THEORIZING THE (BLACK) FEMININE BODY

To theorize the experience of Black female content creators with greater

precision, I employ conceptual tools drawn from the scholarship on influencing and

platform labor as well as processes of commodification exacerbated by digital platforms.

The concepts mapped here examine identity and entrepreneurialism within the context of

digital labor, positioning the body as a site of exploitation and contestation. Mapping the

raced and gendered nature of venture labor will enable me to better articulate the

precarity of Black influencing as a uniquely embodied endeavor, upheld through

internalized neoliberal logics which inform entrepreneurial subjectivities. Using

"aspirational labor" as a point of departure, this chapter theorizes how racist, sexist, and

classist neoliberal logics operate on the Black feminine body in influencing work and

entrepreneurial contexts (Duffy, 2015, p. 49).

The Logic of Aspirational Labor

As a form of self-sustained, precarious labor, influencing work is a fruitful

breeding ground for logics of capitalist labor pinned to an entrepreneurial subjectivity

where the messages that define one's self-worth are pegged to a person's ability to garner

more attention, and thus make themselves more attractive to potential brand partners

(Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Marwick, 2013). In this sense, one's

value as human being and as a citizen is asserted through one's ability to generate

economic and cultural capital. Among influencers, potential gains always outweigh the

necessary costs: In order to achieve one's ultimate dream, one must also be willing to

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subject themselves to long, unpaid hours sculpting and managing a personal brand; weather a lack of legal protections for any problems that arise; and face the possibilities of a serious financial drain in order to get started as an influencer. This is the price and privilege of the new age American dream.

Although the work of influencers may look radically different than the 'traditional' 9:00-5:00 job that once dominated the United States workforce, individuals having a reciprocal relationship with brands and advertisers is nothing new. One fundamental and necessary component of being an influencer is the act of marketing products through brand deals where influencers work to sell products to their followers and increase sales for their company-backed sponsorships. As profitable an option this practice can be for individuals, there are also cultural and ideological incentives encouraging individuals to adopt the mantle of "influencer." Returning to the concept of "aspirational labor," not only do entrepreneurial discourses tell individuals that they *deserve* to achieve their wildest dreams and greatest ambitions, but when coupled with neoliberal logics, posit that they *can and should* profit from them (Duffy, 2015, p. 49; Duffy, 2017; McRobbie, 2018). Scholars assert that the overwhelming emphasis on monetizing one's deepest wishes is embedded in a fundamentally American notion of capital where the individual, the body, and our aspirations are subject to commodification in their ability to reinvigorate the market (Gilbert, 2016; Goldberg, 2009).

Commodifying the Body through the Logic of Self-Promotion

The Black body is Othered, shaped by institutions and societal conventions that not only name Blackness explicitly but have also taught Black peoples to mark

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themselves as such. Danquah (2011) acknowledges the sheer presence of Black modifiers as an example (e.g. *Black* student, *Black* girl, *Black* friend) which is directly applicable to the very notion of *Black* influencers. Danquah (2011) and Gallego (2016) interrogate the idea that Blackness must always be named and that it must always "mean." In particular, Danquah (2011) describes the shape Blackness is forced to take as a "curvature" that must nimbly contort itself to fit within white spaces, best exemplified in media and popular culture or spaces in which visual representations of the Black body are permitted through the "izations" outlined earlier (p. 18). Mapping academic constructions of race through anthropology and medicine, Danquah (2011) asserts the Black female body functions as an object of desire whose threat can be partially diffused by drawing boundaries around Black femininity and sexuality.

The process of naming Black bodies effectively primes them for commodification; historically, appropriation has been a tactic leveraged to minimize the threat those bodies pose in potentially upsetting longstanding norms and structures. In turn, "commodities produce bodies" where the body functions as "its own production/consumption machine" (hooks, 1992, p. 71). Representing the Black body in cultural spheres of consumption yields a cyclical relationship in which brands provide 'inclusion' in exchange for cultural and economic capital extracted from Black culture and markets alike. These disingenuous and invasive tactics are inextricable from colonial structures and histories that have tapped Black communities for their cultural forms only to repackage and sell them back to Black communities at inflated rates. Spillers (1987) criticizes the exploitative nature of appropriating Black voices and bodies to maximize

capital gain in ways that reinforce the economic and political binds holding those bodies in place. In this way, Spillers (1987) and Collins (2005) argue that material culture holds Black people hostage, subjugating them to systemic inferiority.

In addition to regulating Black bodies through American commodity culture, post-feminist discourses are particularly effective in regulating Black women's bodies in ways that facilitate their commodification. Post-feminist discourses encourage women to empower themselves by "owning" their sexuality in order to reclaim bodily agency (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Under neoliberalism, the self – and by extension, the body – is a commodity to be marketed, lending credence to the narrative that ownership is agency (Szeman, 2015). Propped up by neoliberal and post-feminist discourses of empowerment, transferring ownership to the self is subsequently repackaged as a unique brand of authenticity by encouraging women to leverage and invest in their inherent "erotic capital" to enjoy social liberation (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 112). The notion that one can empower themselves by staking claim to the body and flaunting their sexuality is more acutely pronounced for Black influencers who are caught in a peculiar paradox: Black women's sexual expression has been deemed threatening and they have worked tirelessly to shed the jezebel stereotype, yet neoliberal and post-feminist discourses instruct them to 'lean into' their inherent sexuality as a viable path to actualize their agency. Black women are told they can attain freedom through sexual expression, yet the historical framing of the Black feminine body as lewd and dangerous cannot be divorced from the material conditions of their existence.

Although the commodification of Black bodies predates new media, self-promotional strategies on social media appropriate and commodify identity through explicitly visual means. Using interviews with content creators working on various social media platforms, Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy (2018) analyze the relationship between cultural producers and their self-branding strategies, looking at how they respond to the affordances of social networking sites to make their personal identities commodifiable. Duffy, et. al., acknowledge the personal nature of developing a persona unique to a particular platform, each offering a different set of affordances that dictate what kinds of material and aspects of self are most appropriate to be featured on particular sites. For instance, Instagram's focus on singular images prompts a mode of self-promotion similar to modeling while YouTube invites confessional-style monologues. The highly visual nature of social media platforms prioritizes stylized performances that are aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

Because influencing is particularly reliant on brand and market logics most readily evident on primarily visual sites (i.e. Instagram and YouTube), the 'image' becomes the site at which neoliberalized individual labor is enacted and embodied. In this way, influencer success is partially defined by one's ability to adequately harness the visual features of certain influencer-friendly platforms to present the best version of themselves. The individual exists as the site where neoliberal dynamics converge, and personal likability becomes the commodity being marketed and ultimately sold to followers. Amidst the multitude of other identity factors at play, being personable is only one of the first steps to being a successful influencer. The particular dimensions of an

influencer's personality can further dictate which brands and companies are a suitable match for one's identity (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2013).

Few scholars, though, have fully addressed the commodified nature of identity. Relegated to general understandings of free markets' permeation of life at the individual level, this work generally surveys how identity operates as a commodity within neoliberalism as an economic system (Braedley & Luxton, 2010; Foucault, 1980; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Hamann, 2009; Harvey, 2007). Contrary to what some scholars argue, neoliberalism celebrates difference as much as it works to flatten racial, gender, and class diversity (Saha, 2018). Because consumer rights have replaced civil rights, racial differences become integral to advertising and the selling of goods and services (Gilbert, 2016). Companies regularly use diverse looking actors (often based on physical criteria rather than biological or cultural ties to particular groups) to brand themselves as inclusive, appealing to the demographic being represented and demonstrating progressive cultural views (Simon, 2013). A racialized entrepreneurial subject becomes discursively useful insofar as racial difference operates as a tangible source of brand value where companies seek to both market themselves as diverse and to access consumer bases segmented along demographic lines (Saha, 2018). The visibility of racialized subjects in the market reaffirms the ideology of American meritocracy and masks the ways neoliberalism produces inequity (Giddens, 2013; Gilbert, 2016; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010).

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Moreover, commodification operates as a "structuring technology" of racialized

governmentality, where race is transformed into a commodity that can be bought and

sold, as most readily evident in media products (Goldberg, 2009, p. 338). In other words,

race becomes a way to "spice things up" in media representations and American

commodity culture (hooks, 1992, p. 21; Saha, 2018). This is especially true within the

specific industries that social media influencers work. For example, beauty vlogging is a

viable and popular form of digital labor, and many Black influencers focus specifically

on natural hair care products and tutorials (Sobande, 2017; Tate, 2016). Revisiting the

earlier argument about quelling potential threats posed by marginal identities, the

political and resistive potential of racialized products and practices is neutralized when

commodified (Banet-Weiser, 2018; hooks, 1992; Saha, 2018). Thus, racialized bodies

and subjects are invaluable within neoliberal logic, serving as markers of racial

achievement and equality while increasing profits. This sentiment echoes Gilbert (2016)

and Saha's (2018) assertion that commodification becomes the primary means by which

Black cultural producers understand themselves and their relationship to labor.

Although the scholarship on Black influencers is still growing, what does exist

takes great care in considering the necessarily political dimensions of this kind of labor.

Some scholars have examined the way Black women's labor has become commodified

and appropriated as white feminists use Black experiences to develop a language that

furthers their own agenda (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Noakes, 2019). For instance,

Daniels' (2015) discussion of the intersectional Internet provides a lens through which to

make sense of Noakes' (2019) research on Black female artists in digital spaces. Per

Noakes' (2019) work, Black women have been producing artwork featuring both abstract and hyper realistic representations of natural hair at the "intersection" in Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal metaphor. These images have since been located and circulated by various (white) feminist Instagram accounts as visually compelling pieces that demonstrate the power on intersectional perspectives, but rarely are these artists credited (Daniels, 2015; Love, 2019; Noakes, 2019).

Other scholars explored the ways Black women have, in turn, taken up digital tools to educate users about the Black female experience, but also how they become fodder for feminist discourses online, hastily consumed but never fully digested (Brock, Kyasny & Hales, 2010; Noakes, 2019). Brock, Kyasny, and Hales (2010) describe the co-optation of Black-produced texts in digital spaces as the appropriation of technical capital, a subset of cultural capital. If race is something embedded in digital tools and platforms themselves, then the commodification of Black-produced digital artifacts and texts subsequently commodifies race itself, and it is the ambivalent navigation of this inherent commodification this dissertation explores.

<center>The Precarity of Hypervisibility</center>

Returning to the idea of voyeurism surrounding Black bodies, Black women are subject to intense scrutiny even as brands, institutions, and systems clamor to exploit their bodies, labor, and voices. Hartman (1997) maps the grotesque voyeurism that now colors depictions of and conversations about slavery. Her visceral examination slavery and its legacy positions viewers, particularly Black viewers, as both spectators and witnesses to Black tragedy. The normalization of violence surrounding the Black body

"exacerbates indifference to suffering" and continues to hold the Black body captive (p. 4). The dichotomy of terror and pleasure produced by the Black body further twists narratives about Blackness, the body subsequently evoking enjoyment and raw horror. State sanctioned racism in the form of the prison industrial complex and surveillance technologies reshape these horrors in ways that seem natural by virtue of being unnamed. Hartman's (1997) point here is that Black bodies and people have historically been and continue to be 'subjected to,' forced to witness, forced to feel, and forced to exist, realized through fetishistic and voyeuristic gazes.

To account for the experiences of Black women, specifically, Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" to "give intersectionality a break from doing a lot of the heavy lifting for Black feminist thought" (Bailey 2013, p. 341). The term encapsulates the anti-Black misogyny which targets Black women; coupled with Hartman's (1997) argument that the Black body has historically been understood in terms of incredible violence, Bailey maps exactly what's at stake when Black women become visible in public and digital spaces. For Black women, the risk of reliving both personal and intergenerational trauma in highly publicized arenas is quite real. Because the Black body has been Othered to the point of alienation, Black women are seldom afforded the luxury of mental/emotional sensitivity.

Digital platforms and normalized toxic practices on social media (e.g. trolling and doxing) have amplified misogynoir online. Pointing toward 4chan movements, scholarship about digital feminism, and popular discourse, Crockett (2014) asserts that Black women are continually framed in accordance with familiar tropes and stereotypes,

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characterized as angry, threatening, and unnecessarily aggressive in their advocacy for racial justice and criticisms of white feminism. As Black women's labor, particularly on digital platforms, is continually appropriated through hashtags, creative content, and aesthetics, one thing is clear: Misogynoir operates on the idea that it is impossible to hurt Black women. Rooted in a history of medical and scientific experiments which "proved" that Black bodies felt pain differently, the assumption built into these publicly visible criticisms and attacks on Black women is that they cannot be harmed, further dehumanizing them (Alexander, 2011; Crockett, 2014; hooks, 1992). This treatment of Black women online illustrates Hartman's (1997) assertion that normalized violence against Black bodies forcibly positions Black people as witnesses and spectators of their own torment.

Surveillance technologies have been used to forcibly examine and track Black bodies and communities, now amplified by digital platforms that provide companies and individuals with access to a plethora of personal information about Black users. Such exposure is compounded for Black women whose activism and tragedy are magnified on highly visible digital platforms. Subject to more acute forms of visibility, Black women are less shielded from scrutiny in a variety of contexts, be it digital activism, beauty vlogging, or simply existing as ordinary users. As Hartman (1997) argues, the legacy of slavery is visceral and deeply felt in Black communities; as an inherent part of digital activism, the self is at stake and Black women are often forced to relive inherited trauma on display by virtue of their participation in public discourses about race (Bailey, 2013; Crockett, 2014). Again, these women are caught in the love/hate dichotomy that has

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developed around the Black body: They are praised as activists whose voices should be amplified yet are expected to withstand any onslaught of hate, doubt, and scrutiny. To further confound the situation, Black women are, in turn, cast as angry and aggressive for defending themselves or articulating their points with intense emotion, making this a harsh double-bind.

White audiences seldom make efforts to understand Blackness in context, further complicated by the decontextualization of Black culture and aesthetics in media and public discourse in which Black cultural forms are divorced from their historical roots and racialized meanings. Harry (2013) examines how Black culture is continually dismissed and misinterpreted in cultural spheres of consumption and critique even as Black cultural forms like hip-hop dominate pop culture itself. Using Beyoncé's album *Beyoncé* in which the songstress openly communicates her vulnerabilities through music, Harry (2013) explores how Black women are often subject to sharper, more intrusive criticism despite simultaneously being evaluated and extracted of their value. The appropriation of Black cultural forms subjects Black voices to more publicized and often flippant forms of scrutiny even as audiences fail to understand or critically examine the content in its racial context. For instance, at the 2014 CDFA Fashion awards Rihanna dressed in traditional 1920s garb, wearing a slinky dress, silk cap, and a white fur stole. The singer was emulating Josephine Baker and had also styled her hair to evoke the entertainer's likeness, tweeting a side-by-side visual comparison and expressing appreciation for Baker following her recent death at the time. Comments accusing Rihanna of dressing like a whore and, ironically, appropriating white culture quickly

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surfaced, completely ignoring Rihanna's tweet explaining the outfit (Harry, 2014). Such an instance demonstrates the way Black bodies and histories have been decontextualized and white audiences' willful ignorance to the ways Black culture necessarily references and articulates its own particular and uniquely raced history. In Harry's (2014) words, Black women are "insulted, weighed, and isolated," and continually struggle for control over their own bodies and narratives.

Alongside pop culture, new media similarly divorces Black bodies from their historical and cultural contexts. Noble (2013) explores how Google's web indexing system presents particular racialized and gendered understandings of Black women and girls removed from their cultural and political history. In "prioritize[ing] the interests of its commercial partners and advertisers," Google's search engine depicts racist and misogynist portrayals of Black women as natural through the popular lens of objectivity (p. 2). Drawing on critical race theory and Black feminism, Noble (2013) argues that the prevailing narratives about Black women evidenced in search engine results cast them as hypersexualized beings, falling into the centuries old jezebel stereotype. The diversification of pornography coupled with the commodification of the Black feminine body in hip-hop help contextualize the fetishization of Black women in search results (Collins, 2005). In this sense, the capitalist logics which structure entire cultural industries similarly undergird human-made algorithms structuring search engines. Consequently, Black women continue to be rendered sexualized commodities in digital spaces, implicating the racist history of body "politicking" even as the nuances of that history are erased (Alexander, 2011, p. 252).

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Yet, scholars and content creators alike have worked to combat the aggression of hypervisibility. By diversifying depictions of Black women as dynamic individuals in media, Gallego (2016) asserts that we can reclaim Black womanhood. Her argument is predicated on the notion that Black women lead unique, internal lives; rather than defining Black women solely in terms of their suffering, their hardships, or their bodies, Gallego (2016) encourages readers to understand Black women as individuals who lead ordinary, creative, and fulfilling lives whose frustrations and trials do not always stem from racism. Similarly, hooks (1992) asserts that Black women and allies can resist oppressive stereotypes by reconceptualizing the Black body on their own terms rather than viewing one another in accordance with white readings of the Black form. In choosing to "love blackness," through intimacy and warmth, hooks (1992) notes that cultural perceptions of Black bodies can shift to recognize those bodies as people (p. 10). As an alternative to the self-improvement discourses prevalent in the gendered work of influencing, self-love and self-care are framed here as the intimate process of reconnecting Black men and women with their bodies which have long been alienated from them. Here, there is beauty and healing in bonding with ourselves as Black women and finding solidarity in our communities not as "sisters" but as people (Gallego, 2016; Harry, 2013; hooks, 1992).

Although Black women have offered strategies for contesting dominant narratives about the Black feminine body and begun to untangle the tendrils of inherited trauma and internalized stereotypes, the history of Black women's fetishization and commodification cannot be undone or ignored. That history is fundamentally embedded in the logic of

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entrepreneurialism which tells Black women they, too, can participate and compete in market structures that are predicated on systems and regulations which make their success unlikely. As a form of self-promotional labor, influencing centers the body as the site upon which post-feminist discourses of agency and empowerment, commercialization, and racialization converge. As influencers, Black women perform "aspirational labor" on digital platforms where processes of commodification are exacerbated, compounded by neoliberal logics which prioritize the body and the self as a natural commodity. It is this complex web of gendered and racialized tensions which evoke a lengthier history of subjugation that my dissertation explores.

Conclusion

Strategies of commodification amplified by the precarity of hypervisibility place Black influencers in both a mentally and socially compromised position. Because the Black body has been commodified by governments, economic systems, and media industries alike, race itself has become a commodity. Brands often look to leverage that commodity by collaborating with Black influencers, yet those Black creators are expected to do 'twice the work' to secure those partnerships even as their bodies are necessarily objectified in the process. Because influencing is an inherently commercial endeavor that is characterized by the presence of brand partnerships, Spillers' (1987) point that material culture (brand partners, in this case) holds Black creators hostage reveals the double-bind in which Black influencers are caught. Expected to both embody and distance themselves from Blackness, Black creators are tasked with an impossible ask within a system that will exploit them regardless.

Taken together, both theory chapters provide the theoretical tools and perspectives necessary to better and more holistically capture the experience of Black influencers. In bringing together literatures about the Black feminine body's commodification, the racialization of digital technologies, and the neoliberal logics which undergird influencing work, the uniquely raced, gendered, classed, and embodied existence of being a Black creator can finally receive the attention it deserves. These somewhat disparate bodies of scholarship reflect the similarly disparate nature of how Black influencers work, are perceived, and cohere as a group. From popular press coverage, B2B press, Tumblr discourse, and influencers themselves, what is means to be a Black influencer is currently in flux and necessitates a discursive, comprehensive, multimodal approach.

CHAPTER 5

METHOD

To address my research questions, I conducted a critical, multimodal discourse

analysis examining how Black female influencers navigate neoliberal conditions and

understand their work as a racialized form of digital labor. I situated my analyses within

the context of Black women's uniquely raced and gendered history of commodification,

positioning Black influencing as both an extension and subversion of neoliberalism's

Black feminine subject. I conducted nine interviews with Black influencers on Instagram

and YouTube; analyzed Tumblr posts about popular Black influencers; and examined

popular press coverage of Black influencers alongside content produced by influencers

themselves. These data sets formed the bulk of my analytical work. Rather than define

"Black influencers" as those social media laborers who happen to be Black, my

conceptualization instead referred to influencers who are Black *and who produce content*

aimed specifically at or curated for Black communities and audiences (Brock, 2020;

Tate, 2016). Thus, I also examined the personae Black influencers create and project to

their followers, and how that work is discussed in other cultural and digital spaces. The

following sections outline my procedures for collecting various modes of data in order to

interrogate discourses about how Black influencing operates.

Textual Analysis of Popular Press Coverage and Influencer Content

My study began with the examination of popular press coverage about Black

influencers and Black issues, particularly during 2020, as many articles either implicitly

or explicitly alluded to the civil unrest and protests regarding police brutality in the wake

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of George Floyd's murder during the summer of 2020. This corpus of data provided the basis for my analysis of how Black identity was treated in more public forums, how it was used to make sense of a particular cultural and political moment, and how Black influencing continues to be positioned as a specific antidote to broader racial and cultural strife. Although I analyzed articles from legacy news outlets such as *The Chicago Tribune* or *Time*, the bulk of my selected articles came from popular press coverage hosted on primarily digital sites (e.g. BuzzFeed, PopSugar, Refinery29, Mashable, etc.). Additionally, I included 'B2B' press and online articles aimed at particular industries (e.g. *AdWeek*) which targeted brands and companies in their respective industries and educated them about how to locate, leverage, and work with Black influencers generally and in the aftermath of the recent #BlackLivesMatter protests.

Specifically, I located these articles through Google, using key terms such as "black influencers," "black excellence," "black excellence success," "support black businesses," and "how to be a black influencer" to initiate my search. Articles that mentioned Black influencers, specifically, are included in this collection of texts, including those aimed at Black influencers and those that outline how to capitalize on audiences as a Black influencer. Additionally, sources that addressed the best ways to support Black influencers, businesses, or other content creators rounded out my body of popular press texts. Listicles were noted (e.g. the top # Black influencers you should be following) for how they presented, contextualized, and identified which content creators were worth following. Because listicles presented revealing but minimal insights about the nuances of digital labor, I analyzed no more than 6 listicle-style articles for my

project. Conversely, a plethora of lengthier, magazine-style articles (i.e. between 800 and 2,500 words) exist which overtly outlined or grappled with how Black influencers are positioned within the digital economy. Articles aimed at Black influencers and that outline how best to capitalize on online audiences along with articles that detailed the most effective ways to support Black businesses, particularly in the wake of 2020's civil unrest, took top priority in my data collection process.

Following a "preliminary soak," I identified 39 popular press articles that met the aforementioned criteria and allowed me to build meaningful, substantive claims about the way Black influencers are positioned in public discourse and revealed potential insights into the relationship between race and digital labor (Hall, 1975, p. 15). Of the 39 articles about race, labor, Black influencers, and the digital economy, about 10 of them outlined how to support Black businesses and influencers in 2020; about 8 grappled with the concept of "Black excellence" and how the term is often employed in ways that encourage Black individuals to hold themselves to high, 'white' standards of success, a logic which masks the systemic racism and inevitable inequities of achieving said success by promising 'good' publicity for Black communities. Of the remaining 22 articles, about 9 of them focused on the lack of diversity in influencing communities; 7 of them were industry articles that spoke directly to brands, detailing how to work with Black influencers; and, the remaining 5 articles highlighted tips and success stories about what being a Black influencer requires in the competitive digital economy. All articles were found within the first five pages of each Google search. Taken with the 6 listicles mentioned previously, I analyzed a total of 45 articles about Black influencing.

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As part of the popular press coverage surrounding Black influencers, I also cataloged and analyzed video interviews spotlighting Black influencers. The interviews I analyzed included YouTube videos from television networks such as ABC and CNBC and video interviews conducted by digital media companies like WWD and Refinery29. Similar to the queries used to locate the popular press articles, my search terms included phrases like "black influencer," "black Youtuber," "black influencer interview," "black content creator," and "black influencer success," among others. After thoroughly searching Google, YouTube, and visiting media companies' home websites, I found there are plenty of video interviews with influencers, about influencing, and how to become a successful influencer; however, a majority of these interviews featured primarily white content creators – I had to scroll until YouTube's page had populated with new hits three times until I found an interview with a Black influencer from Black Hollywood Live's channel. In fact, many of the videos highlighting how to become a Black influencer or revealing the 'truth' about being a Black influencer are located on individual Black influencer accounts rather than industry YouTube accounts or televised interviews. The difficulty in locating interviews and videos featuring Black influencers reflects the disparity in visibility I explored in my study.

Of the video interviews hosted by networks, about 3 of them focused on the disparities in pay and visibility among Black influencers, often interviewing influencers of varying racial identities about their take on the issue. Conversely, 5 of the videos I found featured well-known influencers in the Black community, asking them to share their success stories. Taken together, I analyzed approximately 65 minutes of video

content. These videos were analyzed in partnership with the popular press articles, and I drew heavily on hypervisibility and neoliberal governmentality to illuminate my insights. I utilized neoliberal governmentality as a framework by which to identify how entrepreneurial discourses were deployed to produce racialized subjectivities in digital labor and content creation. I employed hypervisibility as a conceptual tool to better understand the way Black women are subject to more intense scrutiny and held to higher standards (morally, professionally) within the highly publicized and competitive work of influencing. By placing the articles and video interviews in conversation with the literatures on Black women's commodification and neoliberal logic as a structuring ethos, I more readily mapped the precise ways race is invoked and understood in the popular discourse around Black influencers. The concept of self-governed neoliberal logic also helped me interrogate how race itself becomes a particularly useful tool – and subsequently, a commodity – in brand building practices as evidenced by the industry press coverage and the company-backed interviews with Black influencers.

To supplement my analysis of popular press and industry discourse about Black influencers, I also analyzed individual influencer accounts. I selected YouTube and Instagram as the primary social media platforms to recruit beauty vloggers and other influencers, not only because of their popularity with female influencers, but also because of their heavily visual nature (Duffy, 2015; Scolere, Pruchniewska & Duffy, 2018; Noakes, 2019; Sobande, 2019; Tate, 2016). The making of both race and gender relies heavily on visual cues, especially where race and gender intersect. Both YouTube and Instagram's interface structure place emphasis on the visual, making them excellent

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platforms for examining the specific ways in which the visual commodification of racialized identity happens in neoliberlaized labor (Gill & Scharff, 2013). The accounts whose content I analyzed included well-known Black influencers working primarily on YouTube and Instagram: Alicia Tenise, Mattie James, Sassy Latte, Jackie Aina, Patricia Bright, and Toni Mitchell, to name a few. I selected 10 influencers who primarily work on YouTube and 10 other influencers who work primarily on Instagram. The Black influencers I selected had a range in following, from lesser-known creators with less than 10,000 followers to creators with millions of subscribers. I analyzed each influencer's top five most viewed videos or Instagram posts to substantiate my analysis of public-facing discussions about and representations of Black influencers. The influencer content from YouTube totaled approximately 1,000 minutes of content.

Discourse Analysis of Discussions about Racialization and Influencer Labor on Tumblr

To further bolster my analyses of how Black influencers are discursively positioned and understood, I analyzed posts on Tumblr that grappled with race, digital labor, and Black influencers. As a platform, Tumblr offers a largely anonymous and semi-private space for communities to form, bond, and converse on a number of sensitive issues. Indeed, the circulation of texts and images coupled with its particular affordances give rise to pseudo-academic analyses and discussions of content and events (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Hartl Majcher, 2017; James, 2015; Korn, 2019; McCracken, 2017). Brock (2018) has employed similar methods, using Black Twitter as the centerpiece for his own work using critical discourse analysis and examining "technocultural discourses" online to interrogate the construction, regulation, and

negotiation of Black identity online. I similarly used this method as a way to better understand the communities of Black influencers on Tumblr and how their work is circulated and discussed by users on the platform. Drawing on literature about the ethical dimensions of conducting Internet research, I understood Tumblr as a semi-private space (Convery & Cox, 2012).

Black influencers have been a recurring trending topic on Tumblr with users often noting the overwhelming presence of white women as the ideal and preferred type of influencer. Many users critiqued this issue and called for greater visibility for female influencers of color. Although it is quite common for influencers to post content across multiple social media platforms, choosing to do so on a semi-private space such as Tumblr speaks to the kinds of engagement that occur on the site. I located this content by using Tumblr's primary search feature, searching popular tags such as #black influencers, #black youtubers #black labor, #black women, and #beauty influencer #fashion influencer. My Tumblr search terms cast a wider net by using less specific terminology, as users' tagging practices are highly individualized and Blackness is not quite named in the same way in this more private, anonymized space compared to popular media discourse on more visible digital platforms.

Based on my preliminary searches and as an active user on Tumblr who follows Black activist blogs, I found roughly 51 posts referencing Black influencers, Black women, digital labor, and the appropriation of Black culture and aesthetics. Each post contained longform analyses or rich discussion in the post itself or in the notes section attached to each post. Posts were often comprised of a multitude of screenshots taken

from Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms but were then shared with authors' added commentary, ranging anywhere from 50 to 1000 words, and then circulated, gathering commentary from other Tumblr users in the form of notes, which can reach upwards of 100 comments. Comments vary wildly in terms of length, some users responding only with emojis while others include 200-word replies. In addition to these posts, I also collected textual materials from 18 Black activist and educational blogs focused on Black labor and appropriation, each of which provided a wealth of content to analyze alongside what I already found in Tumblr's 'public' search feature. For privacy purposes, I used the blog titles rather than usernames for identifying the activist blogs on Tumblr: Black Lens: The Influence of Othering, Blackfishing Analysis, Black Women Confessions, The Power of Black Women, iameriwa, and afronerdism are a few of the blogs examined. Using the concepts of the "intersectional internet" and "technologies of race," I mined each post and their corresponding notes for themes regarding racialization, influencers, labor, and appropriation in digital spaces. In analyzing these posts and accounts I effectively examined the technocultural discourses that give rise to other conceptualizations about Black influencing as a form of racialized neoliberal labor, focusing on the community-based understandings of how these dynamics ultimately play out.

Because Tumblr is a highly anonymized platform and because the site operates as a safe haven for healthy debate and discussion regarding identity-based issues, I employed more ethical tactics for accessing texts and information through the site (Korn, 2019; Prskalo, 2019; Sender & Shaw, 2017). Before quoting in-depth posts or notes (i.e.

comments), I first contacted the user in question asking permission to use their content. Because I also sifted through individual blogs to collect texts, I also contacted the account through the site's direct messaging feature to ensure the party consented to my mining their blog for posts and materials. Likewise, if the tags attached to a post were personally cataloged (i.e. created by a user rather than a public tag), I also asked for permission. The posts and tags I found through Tumblr's 'publicly' searched tags did not require permission.

Interviews with Black Influencers

To round out these methods, I also conducted nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals who identify themselves as "Black influencers." I prepared two questionnaires consisting of roughly 20 questions, both of which are available in the appendices to this dissertation (see Appendix B and Appendix C). Each interview was conducted virtually through Zoom and recorded before being transcribed. Each interview generally lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and I successfully interviewed nine Black influencers. The questions in the questionnaires explored what each woman's daily life is like, how they broke into the industry, how they curate their image or brand on their respective social media sites, and how they stay motivated to sustain this work. Additionally, the questionnaires addressed how these women think about the work of influencing, their relationship to the platforms they utilize to distribute their content, the extent to which they feel called to address larger cultural issues regarding race, and the pressures they feel to present and perform a certain identity online. Informed consent

forms were distributed well in advance of the scheduled interviews and participants were

notified ahead of time.

To recruit interview participants, I contacted them through their public-facing

social media accounts on the platforms they create and distribute their content. I cast my

net wide and contacted around 80 accounts which yielded a total of nine participants. I

also drafted recruitment verbiage suited to different modes of communication, available

in the appendices of this dissertation (see Appendix D). In terms of my success rate in

recruiting participants, I subscribed to the channels of content creators I wished to

interview. In the following months I became a more active member in the comment

sections on both YouTube and Instagram. The women running the accounts I followed

regularly scan the comments on their posts and videos, replying to users and looking for

future content suggestions. Because some of these influencers have a somewhat modest

following (i.e. less than 10,000 subscribers), they reply to users with greater frequency

and depth than more well-known or widely followed influencers. To provide anonymity,

I had each of my participants select a pseudonym to which they shall be referred

throughout this dissertation. An anonymized list of all nine interviewees can be found in

the appendices to this dissertation (see Appendix A).

The field of Black influencers is comprised of primarily two kinds: beauty

vloggers and influencers engaging directly with social and cultural issues. When I began

my study, I believed that both groups necessitated different, but somewhat related

strategies for engagement. My strategy for interviewing beauty vloggers was tailored

toward their journey in breaking into these spaces and how they curate their content due

to the enterprising and money-making nature of 'conventional' influencer work (see

Appendix B). My interviews with the more political and activist-oriented influencer

accounts focused more so on their motivating rationale for doing the work that they do

due to the critical and pedagogical elements present in their content (see Appendix C).

The number of questions asked were the same, but the focus was dependent on the nature

of the work in which these women are engaged. Although these two categorizations seem

distinct on paper, I quickly realized that Black influencers often straddle the line between

conventional influencers and influencers who focus more so on political content,

rendering my initial separation a bit moot. The analysis of these interviews provided

insight on the demands of neoliberal governmentality and discourses of

entrepreneurialism which intersect at the site of the subject, focusing on how individuals

make sense of and navigate neoliberal dimensions of racialized digital labor.

Analyses

It is necessary to reiterate that this is a multimodal critical discourse analysis

about Black influencers, and so each of my data sets is meant to work in tandem with one

another as part of a unified, cohesive whole. Rather than any singular data set forming the

'core' of my study, this particular collection of data is equally weighted and cannot be

fully understood apart from one another as evidenced in the similarly recurring themes in

the media discourse and interviews, to name an example. Taken together, I have reached

saturation between all four data sets. Themes regarding Black excellence, tokenism, and

systemic discrimination appeared throughout the B2B press, popular press pieces, Tumblr

discourse, and in the interviews. Specifically, my interview participants often echoed

concerns about the precarity of being a Black woman who does influencing work that were also present in the popular press articles where other Black influencers spoke about their work following the George Floyd protests. Similarly, much of the 'hustle and grind' mentality regarding the way individuals internalize neoliberal logics about work and life were present in Black influencers' confessional style YouTube videos, the video-based media content about Black influencing, and the Tumblr discourse about Black women and labor. As my data collection window drew to a close, I was no longer seeing novel or substantially different threads, themes, or experiences about Black influencers than what had already appeared in the media or Tumblr discourse or the interviews.

Upon collecting these posts and articles and transcribing each of the interviews, I examined these texts to address each of my research questions. The interview transcripts helped me answer the first two research questions regarding how neoliberal discourses are deployed by Black influencers and how these women craft their personae; the Tumblr posts and online articles I collected helped me address my third and fourth research questions, respectively, on what kinds of discourses are being used to make sense of how hypervisibility affects Black female influencers and how online press coverage shapes the way Black issues are addressed in society. I revisited and answered my first research question in the conclusion of my dissertation by placing these varying discourses in conversation with one another, situated within the context of Black women's lengthier histories of fetishization and commodification. Consequently, this collection of texts served as the object of study for my critical discourse analysis of how Black influencers

navigate, experience, and challenge prevailing neoliberal notions of entrepreneurship particularly with regard to racial and gender identity.

Limitations and Future Considerations

My particular study is aimed at understanding what it means and looks like to be a Black influencer. Although I designed a project which examines Black influencers from a number of varying perspectives evidenced through the distinct bodies of data I collected, there are methodological shortcomings which limit my study's ability to reflect a holistic picture of what Black influencing entails. For instance, the participants I recruited for the interviews consisted largely of influencers with smaller followings; I was not able to successfully recruit participants with millions of followers and therefore my sample is disproportionately comprised of Black influencers who are still in the process of growing or developing their brand or who are still relatively new to securing brand partnerships. While the data I have collected about Black influencers closely resembles my findings from the media discourse, the unique struggles my participants identify may not hold true for Black influencers who have garnered millions of followers and lucrative partnerships. Analyzing the YouTube and Instagram content for influencers with a huge following was one solution for tapping into how better-known Black influencers conceptualize their work and persona but it is not a substitute for in-depth conversation.

Additionally, I was unable to recruit any participants from Tumblr. This could be, in part, due to the site's anonymous nature and a certain level of skepticism about 'offline' communication or requests from strangers on the site which may pose acute concerns for Black creators who use the platform. The Tumblr posts and blogs I analyzed

provide excellent insight about how #BlackTumblr discusses Black influencers, labor, and appropriation, yet my claims about why Black creators or communities congregate on the platform or their rationale for doing the kind of activist or educational work in which they are engaged are necessarily limited by my sample.

The time frame during which I collected most of my data also presents challenges for the kinds of claims I am able to make about Black influencers. Conducting the bulk of my data collection in 2021 allowed myself and my interview participants to look back at 2020 with sharper observations about the aftermath. For instance, several of my interview participants were able to evaluate how 2020 affected their income and following in comparison to 2021 – there was a noticeable downturn for each person who mentioned it – but in other ways the time frame presented obstacles. While I successfully analyzed a plethora of popular press articles and B2B press about Black influencers, locating other media content (e.g. news coverage, video interviews, etc.) was difficult due to the scant amount of content available. Moreover, influencers are discussed regularly on Tumblr's site but conversations about Black influencers were still difficult to track down. The latter half of 2021 and early 2022 has seen a sharp increase in content about Black influencers, such as the New York Times' documentary titled *Who Gets to be an Influencer* or the push to hire more Black journalists at the *Philly Inquirer* at the beginning of Black History Month in 2022. As a casual yet habitual Tumblr and Instagram user, I have also noticed that conversations about Black content creators are gaining more traction and visibility on other platforms.

It is also worth mentioning that I have not included any analyses of Twitter in my study. In keeping my analysis focused on how Black influencers are popularly discussed and what being a Black influencer looks like, I wanted to apply Brock's (2018) concept of technocultural discourses to Tumblr, a platform that receives much less attention in scholarship about race and digital media. Moreover, Tumblr's platform and racial affordances have given rise to more longform and anonymous communication that have provided Black communities with a space to engage in critical discussion and debate in ways that are simply not comparable to Twitter's short-form and more public modes of engagement. Although #BlackTwitter would provide some interesting insight about how more public-facing digital communities think about Black creators, for the purposes of my study, I chose instead to focus on #BlackTumblr. That said, many of the influencers I interviewed noted that they regularly use Twitter when they want to start a larger discussion about a particular topic, and the literature about #BlackTwitter, specifically, provides a wealth of conceptual tools for understanding the space. Examining how Black influencers are discussed on Twitter's platform or how #BlackTwitter treats Black creators is a rich and meaningful direction for future research.

<div align="center">Contextualizing 2020 and Black Influencers</div>

My decision to study Black influencers was greatly influenced by George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that followed in 2020. As such, it is necessary to detail the situation to properly contextualize why and when this study was conducted and its subsequent framing throughout each of my analytical chapters. Public protests and discourse surrounding police brutality are not new, and names like Rodney

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King, Trayvon Martin, and Breonna Taylor are likely familiar to many American people. Although the overt abuse of these and many other individuals has similarly incited protests and political mobilization through social media, George Floyd's murder in May 2020 acted as a watershed moment which prompted immediate civil action.

Using social media and hashtags to mobilize their efforts, Americans across the nation gathered in mass to engage in numerous and simultaneous protests in city squares, in front of political dwellings, and near local landmarks to protest what happened to George Floyd. BLM gained significant traction during this time and helped organize national efforts to defund the police, or abolish the police state altogether. The #BlackLivesMatter tag became a mainstay on Twitter and Instagram and was used to help circulate information about where and when protests were happening, how to donate to victims and families affected by police brutality, and other actionable measures. Protests stretched into the fall of 2020 both in the United States and across the globe as international actors protested similar behavior in their home countries or chose to stand in solidarity with Black Americans. During summer 2020, police and media outlets conflated BLM protests with riots, pointing to individuals looting businesses and burning local buildings during the protests as an indicator that protestors had become a violent, unruly mob. Protesters were berated, arrested, and hospitalized, subject to excessive force and abuse by police meant to monitor the demonstrations. Like the video of George Floyd's arrest and murder, the police brutality directed toward protesters was recorded and shared to social media, making the George Floyd protests a uniquely visible and controversial spectacle.

This critical juncture continues to animate the ways individuals talk about American Blackness. In the aftermath of Floyd's murder, media outlets and other (white) influencers positioned Black influencers as a vital way to support Black communities; by instructing users and digital audiences to follow Black influencers, instructing brands to collaborate with them on campaigns, and encouraging white individuals to educate themselves about racial histories and tensions, being a Black influencer in 2020 became a political endeavor. Because Black influencers were pushed into the spotlight, expected to speak on or educate their influx of largely white followers about race, these creators found themselves in a simultaneously lucrative and vulnerable position. George Floyd's murder acted as a catalyst for long-embroiled tensions surrounding police brutality to ignite once again but also placed Black creators and personalities in an uncomfortable spotlight, demanding their attention and insights amid a devastating instance of racial trauma. Indeed, 2020 was a financially rewarding year for Black influencers, yet their guilt about "capitalizing on Black tragedy" was visceral (McNeal, 2020; Wooden, 2020). This tension characterizes much of the media discourse about Black influencers and is a consistent thread in the interviews I conducted. To understand what being a Black influencer means and looks like in 2022, we must also consider how Black creators' work, lives, and futures were shaped by 2020.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS:

THE APPROPRIATION OF BLACK WOMEN'S BODIES AND VOICES

The appropriation of Black culture, aesthetics, and bodies is firmly rooted within

the legacy of slavery. In particular, Black women's bodies have been commodified

through media and consumer culture, a reality doubly felt in the highly visible and

competitive work of influencing where Black influencers are disproportionately and

overwhelmingly female. Not only does cultural appropriation take place through

individuals and brands taking up Black culture and aesthetics for the 'cool' factor or for

cultural capital, but brands similarly appropriate Black bodies to appear "woke" and gain

tangible brand value. Using Black women to diversify their feeds on social media, brands

exploit Black influencers to earn cultural capital and minimize blowback from

consumers. In the same vein, the extent to which an influencer is easily identifiable as

'Black' becomes a measure of one's authenticity for brand partners. Coupled with the

concept of hypervisibility, tokenism in brand collaboration works to center Black bodies

within public discussions about diversity and racial justice while simultaneously making

those bodies vulnerable to criticism from digital audiences. Black influencers are thus

placed in a precarious position where they must navigate racial relations and tensions in

digital spheres and consumer contexts even as they compete to retain creative control

over their content, bodies, voices, and emotions.

By virtue of working with brand partners who wish to diversify their own image,

Black influencers are necessarily subject to bodily exploitation. As Black creators work

to be seen as unique individuals rather than part of a monolith or subset of 'typical' (white) influencers, brands value difference insofar as it is profitable. Like the neoliberal logics that undergird influencing work, racial, ethnic, and gender diversity enable brands to argue that the system is working with visual indictors of Black women's ability to succeed in digital labor. By incorporating a select few Black creators into the fold, brands depoliticize Blackness even as they use it to gage whether a Black influencer is the 'right type' of Black to round out their campaigns or company initiatives. Thus, brands have found ways to leverage racial difference toward both capitalist and self-ingratiating ends.

Branded Diversity through Tokenism

The media discourse about Black influencers is characterized by both bodily and contextual tokenism. Because brands tend to consider Black influencers' content as niche or inherently political, Black creators are regularly passed over for sponsorships, campaigns, and initiatives in favor of more 'neutral' white influencers. The B2B press, in particular, reveals the underlying rationale for when and how brands choose to work with Black influencers, often doing so when they want to reach Black consumers or upon realizing that a specific campaign sorely lacks diversity and risks alienating younger, more politically aware generations of consumers who expect diverse content.

In order to tap Black consumer markets, brands have increasingly looked toward digital platforms to do so. For much of the B2B press offering insight about how to partner with Black influencers, the "power of the Black dollar can no longer be ignored" as the growing purchasing power of Black buyers offers a lucrative enterprise for companies able to effectively appeal to Black consumers, and the media discourse about

influencer marketing positions Black influencers as the gateway to accessing that revenue

(Eferighe, 2020). The COO of ad agency Goodway group explicitly frames Black

influencer marketing as necessary for capturing Black markets:

> Reaching [an African American] audience is key for businesses to expand
> their consumer base. African Americans are influential in the success or
> failure of a brand. With the African American buyer power projected to
> rise to $1.54 trillion by 2022, businesses need to embrace African
> American influencers to resonate with this audience and increase
> engagement with the consumers that drive the purchase decisions (Canty,
> 2020).

Projections about the Black dollar's exponential increase in value provides a bulk

of the B2B framing as to why brands should be working with Black influencers, but

industry professionals writing for trade publications such as *Adweek* note what is unique

about the kind of work Black influencers do as a point of potential consumer outreach

(Canty, 2020; Eferighe, 2020). Dakari Dunning of Sparkloft Media, a social media

agency that pairs influencers with brand partners, states that "Where minority influencers

have an advantage is their connections […] Black influencers have much closer and

personal connections to their audience that gives them a really big leg up" (Eferighe,

2020). Here, Black influencers are identified as "critical" for brands trying to reach Black

consumers partly because the connection with their followers is more intimate and close-

knit, implying that closer relationships yield higher success rates for brand partners who

market their products through influencers (Eferighe, 2020).

Beauty industries have also worked to include Black models and influencers as

part of their ongoing partnerships in an effort to capture Black consumers and audiences

alike. For instance, *Elle*'s beauty commerce editor Nerisha Penrose (2020) explores how

beauty brands have traditionally excluded Black women in failing to develop cosmetic

products (e.g. foundation, lip color, etc.) suitable to darker skin tones. Penrose (2020)

cites Tarte's 2018 release of the brand's 15-shade Shape Tape Foundation as one such

example and notes that the range of available shades contained "only two shades [that]

were designed for darker complexions," describing the move as "negligent." Seven Black

influencers quoted in Penrose's (2020) piece offer their perspectives on exclusion in the

beauty industry, focusing largely on the limited product options for darker skin tones.

Influencer Offune Amaka states:

> On the surface, yes, we're getting more foundation shades and better
> campaigns, so brands have made a lot of progress. But that's not to say
> Black people can relax now. No, we have to keep demanding that if you're
> going to launch something that has 60 shades, make sure all the shades are
> available in-store and that people know how to find their shade—that's one
> of the areas of the makeup industry that almost never gets talked about, the
> in-store experience (Penrose, 2020).

Companies' somewhat half-hearted attempts to appease Black consumers are

evidenced through foundation in particular, which seldom match darker and cooler skin

tones with accuracy. Amaka's statement not only speaks to the difficulty Black women

face in finding products that both work and are meant for them, but it also demonstrates

how Black and dark-skinned people are precluded from commercial spheres given the

nature of brands' limited product releases even as buzzwords like "diversity," solidarity"

and "inclusion" pepper their branded content (Penrose, 2020). Several of the influencers

quoted in Penrose's (2020) piece note that the woke language is largely performative as

retroactively releasing a few darker shades of concealer do little to address larger,

systemic issues such as the wage gap between Black influencers and their white

counterparts. One of my interviewees notes that systemic issues can potentially be addressed through increased representation, claiming "visibility is directly related to the pay gap" (A, interview, 2021). A cites better representation for Black creators in partnerships, campaigns, etc. as one way to position Black creators as equally viable and worthwhile partners, but greater visibility can also lead to tokenization by brands looking to exploit Black markets.

Pull Up or Shut Up, a campaign that encourages beaty companies to share how many Black employees they have on staff, is a popular example among the influencers Penrose (2020) interviewed who acknowledge the value of beauty companies expanding products with Black consumers in mind but assert the change they want to see involves greater levels of transparency in company hiring practices and who comprises the marketing team for beauty campaigns. Encouraging brands to make internal changes was a common sentiment within Penrose's (2020) article, such as beauty influencer Monica Veloz's assertion that "diversity isn't only a 40-plus shade range. What about the LGBTQ representation? Don't support the LGBTQ community for just one month and then move on" (Penrose, 2020). Influencer Jessie Woo similarly drew attention to representation, commenting: "It's not enough for the black community that these beauty brands want to expand the shades. We want to see us represented in the offices too. We want to see black people represented on the executive board" (Penrose, 2020). Providing one or two token dark shades as part of a foundation line is no longer sufficient for meaningfully addressing racially exclusionary practices in the beauty industry. Rather, brands are being called to engage to change the makeup of the system itself.

Providing more inclusive product lines is often a viable and preferred solution for brands that consider Black influencers inherently niche or a subset of conventional influencing. Luxury fashion publication *Glossy* compiles some of the discriminatory experiences Black influencers have faced in the industry through interviews with Black content creators (Flora, 2020). In the column, one influencer recalls a sponsorship with the hair care company Garnier, claiming that when the hair dye she was meant to review "did not work with her hair type" the brand paid her a reduced "kill fee" to terminate the contract rather than paying the agreed amount (Flora, 2020). Later in the same piece, a social media strategist recounts hosting an influencer party only to have the CEO complain about the multiple Black creators who has been invited, stating: "the event looked like a 'black party' on Instagram" and continued to say "[w]hile being inclusive and diverse is good, be aware that we need to kind of think about white people as well" (Flora, 2020). The notion that showcasing or partnering with too many Black influencers makes it a "Black party" is both a compelling and distressing one, indicating that Black influencers somehow pose a threat to a brand's mission, image, or values. In another article I analyzed from the digital publication company *Medium*, the CEO of CFG marketing agency recalls a variety of exchanges about Black influencers during her time in marketing, including a person who requested to change the talent's hair because "that's not our style" (Campbell, 2020). Taken together, the experiences Black influencer have shared with media outlets demonstrate how the Black body is used as a tool, serving as a source of tangible brand value yet subject to regulation. In this way, the threat of overt, visible Blackness is partially minimized by including a token few.

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In addition to limiting the number of Black influencers in a given campaign or press trip, brands often consider the content Black influencer create to be niche. In an interview with marketing website The Drum, influencer Eulanda Osagiede claims brands regularly cite the lack of a budget for particular and "specialized" campaigns as the reason for low or nonexistent pay despite white influencers receiving payment for working on the same campaign (Deighton, 2020). The idea that brands consider Black-produced content niche is reinforced in the B2B press about favoring white influencer for more generalized campaigns and identifying explicit engagement with "African American culture" as a vital criterion for selecting a Black influencer to work with (Adey, 2019; Canty, 2020). Several of my interviewees also shed light on how the term "niche" is applied to their content by both brands and other creators (Lauren, 2021; Sky, 2021; Y, 2022). Sky stated that brands do not believe that Black creators can speak to wider audience or make content that is not explicitly tied to their race which is why she has a problem with the word "niche," echoing the sentiments regarding Black influencer work in the B2B press.

Tara, however, focused on a more generalized iteration of niche content, admitting that she feels "some type of way" about catering to a particular niche as an influencer:

> A lot of bigger creators tell you in order to grow, you need to have a niche, and a niche is basically just a category of what your social media, your YouTube, your Instagram, your Tik Tok is about […] Personally, I don't like to box myself, so that's why I don't like that word 'niche' (Tara, interview, 2022).

Although Tara began this part of our conversation discussing the concept of niche content more generally, the way race is hailed in relationship to that niche quickly became a point of focus. She explained that she describes herself as a "lifestyle" influencer because it allows her to have "talks and conversations" with her followers "as a Black woman [and] as a human" (Tara, interview, 2022). In this way, the flexibility of lifestyle influencing unconcerned with specific categorization allows Tara to engage with her identity in a more holistic way that does not necessarily center her race as an inherent part of the work she does, despite how brands typically frame Black creators.

My interviewee Devyn similarly discussed how Black creator content is categorized as niche by both brands and the platforms on which influencers work. She notes that increased representation for Black influencers can allow users, brands, and media companies to view Black creators apart from the creator specializations with which they have traditionally been associated:

> On place like YouTube, I feel like we fall into certain categories like hair or makeup […] that's like what people want to see, but there's so many different types of Black women and I don't feel like places like YouTube really do the best job at, you know, making room for different kinds of people […] like people that are into cooking or video games or just different aesthetics, like you don't see that as much (Devyn, interview, 2022).

Another interviewee, Sabine, works as a culture journalists and content creator and is "parked at the intersection of geekdom and diversity," whose content focuses largely on "genre," such as speculative fiction, comic books, superheroes, and Afro-futurism (Sabine, interview, 2022). Sabine also reflects on the idea that Black content is

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niche, noting how beauty is still the preeminent way brands conceptualize and categorize

Black content creators:

> Black women in most spaces especially geek space have been ignored for a very long time and its really funny because a lot of people don't know where to place me, especially when they look for things like influencers. Even if you look at something like influencer marketing where companies are set up to cater to influencers, there is nothing for women that are not beauty influencers. Like, [they'll say] if you're not beauty and lifestyle, what are you? 'Oh, I'm geek and gaming like the dudes.' Well, we don't have any women for that. 'Maybe you should' (Sabine, interview, 2022).

Both Devyn and Sabine's descriptions of the type of work Black creators often do

or are expected to do shed light on assumptions about what Black women do and which

spheres of consumption they tend to populate. It is no coincidence that participation in

the beauty industry is the preferred or expected mode of influencing for Black creators,

given the Black feminine body's history of commodification through bodily-focused

commercial and political endeavors (hooks, 1992; Saha, 2018). In this way, Black

creators must fight to carve space for themselves, crafting an understanding of their work

and identity apart from normative standards about beauty and Black femininity.

Although brands and platforms consider Black influencers niche, they do

recognize the importance of maintaining an inclusive image, particularly for younger

generations of consumers. In a piece published on the social marketing website Later,

writer Monique Thomas (2021) notes that brands are "missing out on the buying power

of millennials and Gen Z consumers" who expect greater diversity and meaningful forms

of inclusion in both branded content and company makeup. In one of the podcast

episodes I analyzed comprised of an interview with Black influencers, one creator

similarly notes that brands prefer white influencers because they better represent the

brand's more generalized target audiences, implying the neutrality of whiteness, yet also

want to capitalize on Black markets (Adey, 2019). As evidenced on both the podcast and

marketing article, tokenism becomes a marketing tactic viewed as a viable path for

accomplishing both goals. Working with Black influencers is positioned as a way to gain

entry with newer generations of buyers who are likely to support brands that diversify

their advertisements and branded content. In Thomas's (202B) blog post, influencer

Sashagai Ruddock explains that brands are contacting her more frequently with requests

to hire her as an ambassador, an observation matched by several of my interviewees, but

have no dedicated budget to support the position, effectively asking her to work for free.

My interviewee T added:

> I definitely have noticed over time that a lot of the networks that I work
> with, not specific brands, have been sending out messages over the last
> year and a half that they are working to be more inclusive and feature
> more diverse groups of creators (T, interview, 2022).

The "year and a half" T refers to encompasses the latter half of 2020 and 2021,

alluding to brands' increased interest in diversity following the George Floyd protests.

Tellingly, brands understand the need to outwardly diversify who they work with, but this

logic suggests that collaborating with Black influencers operates less as an economic

partnership where influencers are compensated for their labor and more like charity work

as part of a company-mandated DEI initiative.

Indeed, diversity initiatives structure much of the rationale undergirding corporate

decisions to work with Black influencers in the B2B press and popular press pieces about

industry practices. Influencer marketing platform Fohr has prompted collective action

due to the company's recent campaigns and initiatives which use of a few token Black

influencers to appease public demands for more inclusive business practices despite underpaying them (Tietjen, 2020). Likewise, two influencers quoted in Deighton's (2020) article for The Drum cite specific campaigns where white influencers were removed to create space for more influencers of color due to clients requesting more diversity. Such logic shifts blame to the 'ignorance' of individual influencers supported by the notion that Black influencers have not branded themselves well enough to be considered alongside white influencers with bigger followings and higher engagement. Deighton (2020) discusses the importance of the Black dollar for such companies, warning that they are alienating a profitable bracket of consumers in their assumption that white audiences would rather see white faces. Throughout the piece, influencers assert that "brands still desire a white, youthful audience" and are more likely to seek partnerships with similarly young, white, conventionally attractive influencers concentrated in "New York, California, or Dallas," suggesting a somewhat unconscious racial and geographic bias in determining which influencers will be the best fit for a particular campaign (Deighton, 2020).

Still, other writers have criticized the performative measures brands have taken to diversify their image and products in the aftermath of 2020. In an article for *Vogue Business*, Schiffer (2020) discusses beauty companies such as L'Oréal and Louis Vuitton and the lack of diversity in their promotional content and press trips prior to the George Floy protests. Similarly, several of the influencers I interviewed noted that 2020 was their most profitable year during which they secured numerous partnerships during the summer and autumn. For instance, A noted that "2020 was [her] highest grossing year,"

but saw a "dip in [her] deals in 2021 (A, interview, 2021). A attributes her declining

partnerships to brands "no longer being held accountable" despite their largely

"superficial motives" in appearing inclusive in 2020, leaving companies with little

incentive to continue collaborating with Black content creators (A, interview, 2021). My

interviewee Dominique concurs, characterizing the push for diversity in 2020 as brands

not "want[ing] to look racist" (Dominique, interview, 2022). In this way, brands leverage

deals with Black influencers to improve their image and affirm support for Black

communities, using Black women's bodies to do the heavy lifting of establishing

themselves as both woke and diverse by virtue of their sheer presence.

<p align="center">Tokenism and Black Education</p>

In addition to seeing an influx in sponsorships during 2020, several of the

influencers I interviewed mentioned that many of their sponsorships are concentrated

around February during Black History Month. In one case, Afro-Indigenous influencer

Lauren noted that she also received numerous offers to collaborate during Indigenous

Peoples Month in November each year (Lauren , interview, 2021). Not only does the

timing of these brand deals clearly indicate the use of tokenism among brands looking to

use Black women for short-term engagement, but brands also desire a particular kind of

performance or voice in their request for education. Two interviewees noted that across

the board, many of the collaborations they receive during these months involve "an

educational component" in some way, be it posting a video about Black history and

events while shouting out the brand in question or tackling another aspect of racial

justice, much of which falls near months dedicated to particular minorities (Lauren,

interview, 2021; Dominique, interview, 2022). Rather than a more standard package, the added labor of speaking about racial justice and educating the masses is a much bigger, more deeply personal ask.

Interviewees expressed frustration at being met with requests to educate white audiences regardless of whether doing so is part of their regularly scheduled content or digital personae. Lauren explains that she has on occasion "walked away from a project" when she has felt "disrespected" as a Black woman in terms of brands' assumptions about the kind of content she is willing to produce (Lauren, interview, 2021). By virtue of requiring Black influencers to educate as an additional condition to a run-of-the-mill contract, brands are appropriating Black women's voices to suit their own capitalist pursuits in the hopes of increasing audience engagement, improving their public perception through woke points, or generating revenue from more politically oriented millennial and Gen Z consumers. To twist the knife further, A and Lauren both noted that they rarely hear from those brands during the remainder of the year, if at all. As a kind of currency, brands provide inclusion in exchange for cultural and economic capital mined from Black culture through their partnerships with Black influencers. Here, Black influencers are exploited in order to capture Black and white consumers and to garner public favor with digital audiences (Collins, 2005; Spillers, 1987).

One of my other interviewees, however, seeks out and creates educational content even though it is not necessarily part of what she does as a travel and food blogger. Rather, Dominique is compelled to spearhead education about race online in the last several years:

I was doing a lot of education type stuff, like, I started doing Black history stuff on Tik Tok. Especially during the election, I would get on my Instagram stories all the time, and I would be like that's not how this works. That's not how any of this works. And people would be like how do you know? I said 'my student loans I paid. Let me educate you' (Dominique, interview, 2022).

During our conversation, Dominique also addressed her experience as a "token" Black person doing this kind of working. Having spent a large portion of her childhood in a predominantly white suburb in the south, Dominique states that she is more comfortable inserting herself into conversations about race online, especially given that many of her early followers were white women:

I started getting a lot of people, especially white people, that were following and wanting to learn more because 'you give it to us without giving any kind of bias or bashing' […] For me it's probably been easier than for a lot of other people, but I think sometimes it comes from being able to cater [to white audiences]. I am fully willing to be the token Black, like somebody gotta get in there and open the door […] If people have a genuine interest to learn and educate themselves, sometimes I get a little frustrated […] People say 'well, it's not Black people's job or emotional labor,' and I get that, but if we don't meet people half way, how are they going to learn? We tell them to do their own research and look what happens (Dominique, interview, 2022).

Dominique's decision to enter and create educational spaces for white audiences online is an outlying sentiment among the influencers I interviewed, though it is worth noting that several of them do this work as part of their brand deals rather than on their own time. Interestingly, Dominique's position partially illustrates Charles Mills' (1998) own arguments about Black identity and its politicization. Here, Dominique is not only engaging race on her own time, but also on her own terms. Later in our interview, she explained that she used to be more cautious about what she said and posted about race online so as not to "lose any brand deals," but realized that "appeasing racists on the

Internet is not going to pay [her] bills" and instead chooses to "say what [she] want[s] to say" (Dominique, interview, 2022) In this way, Dominique uses her education and platform to dispel misinformation about American history and racial justice where her own racial identity "shap[es] [her] being" and ability to lead these conversations without being the singularly defining feature of who she is or what she stands for (Mills, 1998, p. xiv).

Black influencers sometimes choose to walk away from partnerships because of the conditional contracts or assumptions about issues they are willing to address, but the media discourse about Black influencing also reframes the kind of work Black influencers are doing. In one of the PopSugar articles I analyzed, former content director Weil McKinley (2020) notes that the fashion industry is notorious for marginalizing Black women and needs to be doing more to adopt antiracist principles in their business practices, asserting "that for far too long, fashion hasn't done enough to amplify Black voices." In the article, Instagram is introduced as a place where the work of antiracism is more easily facilitated due to the presence of Black influencers on the site, described as "a platform where Black creatives can be seen and heard in their own words" (Weil McKinley, 2020).

Weil McKinley's (2020) article briefly profiles 42 Black influencers working on Instagram, providing a few key words and phrases to describe each woman's theme or specialty in a slideshow style presentation. Most of the influencers are described as specializing in "antiracism," "feminism," or "activism" alongside their "inspirational" and "equally candid" content (Weil McKinley, 2020). Taken with the article's opening

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lines about antiracist action, it should be noted whether the influencers being featured would label themselves or their content as antiracist or activist. For instance, Instagrammer Danielle Prescod is listed as a fashion editor who "will force [followers] to examine [their] own choices, habits, and ability to be a bigger voice for antiracism and change" (Weil McKinley, 2020). Although Prescod does include political material in her posts – such as a video reflecting on the January 6th coup – her content focuses largely on clothing, buying sustainable, and opening up about her own mental health. To frame Prescod's content as a space where audiences can educate themselves and learn to be a better ally is somewhat of a mischaracterization of her work. Brands have made little effort to understand or contextualize the work of Black influencers, choosing to label them as activists when the very same creators have not termed themselves or their content as such (Harry, 2014). As Black women struggle for control over their own narrative, brands and digital media companies reinforce the connection, further affirmed by white readers and followers who flock to influencers named in the listicles expecting education about race.

Blackout Tuesday (also known by its tag #BlackOutTuesday) similarly garnered backlash for its "slacktivism" in adopting a largely performative, ill-considered, and 'quick fix' response to George Floyd's murder (Ho, 2020; Jennings, 2020). As a form of collective protest against police brutality in the wake of George Floyd's murder, Blackout Tuesday saw brands, companies, and individuals posting black squares to their respective social media channels and networks to demonstrate their solidarity. On June 2, 2020, brands and individual users flooded Instagram's feed with black squares, many of the

posts using #BlackLivesMatter to circulate the message. Although intended as an act of solidarity, Black activists criticized the mass posting of black squares as woefully insufficient and for cluttering the #BlackLivesMatter tag with a sea of black squares which pushed critical information about protests, donations, and next steps further down the tag's page (Jennings, 2020).

Returning to the appropriation of the body, #BlackOutTuesday allowed brands, individuals, and other influencers to reaffirm their support for Black Lives Matter. Using the opportunity to work with Black influencers to diversify their feeds and branded content, companies can attempt to smooth over recent controversies or shield themselves from criticism about their sub-par inclusive practices in the past. Drawing on Hartman (1997) and Alexander's (2011) claims about how the Black feminine body is rendered vulnerable as it is fetishized in its visibility, collaborating with Black influencers does not seem to be entirely collaborative at all. Placed on less than equal footing, Black influencers are the ones experiencing the stakes, putting themselves "out there" to educate white audiences about race where their voices and bodies are front and center. Brands are thus creating a voyeuristic space in which they place Black bodies on display toward their own ends. By encouraging Black influencers to speak up about race in the aftermath of 2020, brands laud themselves for the clout they receive with little regard for their exploitative practices.

Further critiquing the performative aspects of inclusive branding, *Vogue Business* columnist Schiffer (2020) informs readers that diversifying content with Black models and influencers "is good business" and that inclusive marketing is especially effective

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with younger generations of consumers, indicating that "69 percent of Gen Z and millennials [say] they think it's positive for brands to feature diverse models" in their content. However, Schiffer (2020) notes that while there is "still inequality between white influencers and their Black peers," "social media activism is helping to raise awareness of the issue [regarding whitewashed influencer campaigns]." Beauty companies such as L'Oréal and Clé de Peau, have responded to criticism by removing press trip photos featuring only white influencers and promising to expand their makeup lines to include darker foundations and more heavily pigmented eyeshadows, but Black influencers have called for more substantial changes in the beauty industry (Penrose, 2020; Schiffer, 2020). One industry professional calls for more inclusive hiring practices and company makeup, stating: "I don't want to be an ornament on the shelf, I want my opinions and ideas to be respected" (Schiffer, 2020).

Offering more 'diverse' products seems an insincere response on the part of brands that have consistently fallen short of diversity and inclusion within their companies and respective industry. Experts quoted in media company Ozy's article about the uptick in brand collaborations with Black creators express skepticism about brands' sincerity and commitment to inclusion, noting that "[s]ome companies might sign on [Black] talent just to check the boxes given their newfound focus on the Black market" (Eferighe, 2020). Fashion influencer Natasha Ndlovu states: "Brands need to convince audiences that they are serious about [catering to] a diverse customer base […] You can't do that by using a Black influencer once a year and calling it a day" (Schiffer, 2020). Coupled with one CEO's statement that too many Black influencers in a given space

makes it a "Black party," Ndlovu's quote reveals brands' resistance to fully and genuinely committing to Black markets (Flora, 2020). Developing products to suit Black skin and hair or partnering with Black influencers invites Black consumers to participate in commercial spheres where they have historically been excluded while outright negating the call for systemic change from digital activists, consumers, influencers, and Black industry professionals (Danquah, 2011). In this way, Black identity and aesthetics (e.g. natural hair care products or foundations suited to darker skin tones) are made permissible through consumption rather than integrated into the company structure.

<div align="center">Censoring Black Women Online</div>

In the digital era, brands are not the only ones appropriating or silencing Black women's voices. All forms of appropriation are a particularly heated topic on Tumblr, and Black content creators and users have expressed frustration with the way white users reframe their posts and arguments in ways that are easier or 'kinder' for white users to understand. In 2021, writer Ijeoma Oluo's Twitter thread about this phenomenon was screen capped and shared to Tumblr. Part of her thread reads:

> If you notice that a Black woman has drawn a hard line online with a white woman who is exhibiting harmful, racist behavior – showing up to be the gentle white woman who will explain the issue in a softer tone is often not as helpful as you think (Oluo, 2021).

This thread not only reflects longstanding stereotypes about Black women communicating aggressively or being overemotional or overexaggerated in their speech, but also demonstrates how Black women's words and voice are continually regulated by other users who desire a 'less-threatening' and more palatable discussion about race. Asking Black women to moderate their frustration with white audiences or negate their

boundaries altogether to make white users' encounters with race online operates as an extension of appropriative behaviors, casting aside Black women's very real, justified pains and frustrations in favor of white narratives and interpretations about Black realities.

In a listicle published to the PopSugar website, writer Jordan Lewis (2021) briefly unpacks the history of Black women's marginalized bodies, noting that what are essentially Love Your Body discourses originated in the 1960s with queer Black women who wanted to carve space for themselves in a world that ostracized them (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2014). Lewis (2021) explains that this Black feminist take on body positivity was "hijacked by average-sized white women with hourglass figures, whose focus on the aesthetics of body positivity diminished the true meaning." The slideshow style presentation of this PopSugar piece features Instagram posts taken from Black influencer accounts which include a few lines about each woman's theme and overall mission. These influencers are described as "activists" in the opening paragraphs, and most of the spotlights use terms like "female empowerment" and "body confidence" coupled with the use of racialized phrases and hashtags such as #BlackGirlMagic (Lewis, 2021). Like the Weil McKinley (2020) piece, Lewis (2021) partially mischaracterizes some of the content these Black influencers create, in this case labeling Black, plus-sized creators who explicitly address topics like health, fat-shaming, and normative beauty standards as activists. Acknowledging the appropriation of body positivity becomes a moot point where Black creators' work is inadequately misrepresented based on their physique and perceived motivations for doing what they do.

One of Lewis' (2021) descriptions indicated that influencer Nyome Nicholas-Williams publicly challenged Instagram's nudity guidelines, claiming they disproportionately censored Black bodies and "won" her case, prompting Instagram to change their policies. Nicholas-Williams claimed that "pictures of very naked, skinny white women" populate Instagram's platform, yet her own content was being flagged (Asher Hamilton, 2020). Her campaign #IWantToSeeNyome caught Instagram's attention, and after reviewing Nicholas-Williams' posts, concluded that its "policy on 'breast-squeezing' had been inappropriately applied" to her images, presumably due to Nicholas-Williams' size (Asher Hamilton, 2020). This is not the first time Black influencers have accused Instagram's algorithms of hiding their content, a sentiment shaping some of the media and Tumblr discourse about the platform's "shadowban" which can hide or restrict posts without the poster's knowledge (Forsey, 2021; Geyser, 2021). Algorithms structuring the platforms on which most influencers work coupled with the ease with which social media users can co-opt "Blacktags" and racialized discourse makes the regulation of Black bodies simple and accessible.

Taken with brands' use of token Black influencers to align themselves with racial justice and inclusivity, Black influencers' bodies and voices are both appropriated and commodified given the overtly commercial context of influencing work. The micro-aggressions Black women are subjected to regarding their tone of voice when discussing race online and algorithmic discrimination on platforms where Black influencers work demonstrate how bodily regulation shapes both small scale interactions and systemic,

structural issues online. As such, Black women and Black influencers are expected to nimbly contort themselves to be more palatable for white audiences and brands.

Blackness as a Measure of Authenticity for Brand Partners

Appearing authentic and relatable is a critical component of influencing work, and for brands looking to partner with influencers, choosing the ideal candidate often includes making decisions about which influencers are 'truly' authentic. As a quintessential aspect of how influencers present themselves to followers online, appearing authentic can not only attract additional followers but also works to legitimize who an influencer is. Influencers are described in the literature as "micro-celebrities" with brand deals and mass followings being the key criteria around which influencing coheres as a viable enterprise (Marwick, 2013). In order to maintain their mass following and keep brand partners interested, influencers must develop a strong rapport with their followers and keep engagement high. This trust is often accrued through transparency, be it influencers openly addressing sponsorships or allowing followers to glimpse their personal lives. Posting clips of family events on Instagram reels or uploading confessional-style YouTube videos without makeup are a couple examples of what authenticity can look like, but potential brand partners expect less individualized forms of authenticity from Black influencers and seek more "representative" creators enmeshed within Black digital spaces according to a few of the articles I analyzed in the B2B press (Campbell, 2020; Canty, 2020).

Although authenticity can refer to the extent to which an influencer is truthful about their financial standing or the role of brands in the content they produce, for female

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influencers authenticity necessarily hails the feminine body as well. For instance, beauty vloggers often post content in which they wear little to no makeup and fashion bloggers will, at times, post selfies in sweats and an old t-shirt. The confessional style YouTube video is a particularly effective format for feeling as though these influencers are letting their followers in on a secret or act as a casual meet up with a close friend. Similarly, the heavily visual nature of Instagram encourages content creators to enact authenticity by way of visual play. For instance, Black beauty vlogger Jackie Aina will sometimes forgo her makeup for a "chill" video or vintage Instagrammer nadiiife will upload step-by-step pictures of her hair routine, including the messier, unedited shots between steps. In particular, posting unedited or candid content is an effective way to build rapport with one's audience by way of curating a relatable persona (Marwick, 2013). While authenticity is largely enacted through the body for influencers working on primarily visual platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, Black influencers must validate their authenticity through additional means, often forced to negotiate their 'realness' through the expectations of followers and brand partners alike.

In addition to managing authenticity through visual platforms which center and commodify the (feminine) body, the politicization of Black identity also becomes a measure by which Black influencers are considered authentic. The tokenization of Black influencers through brand partnerships reveals how perceived Blackness becomes a key focal point in understanding how Black influencers navigate their work within the context of a system which both subjugates and capitalizes on Black women's bodies and voices. Forced to navigate user and brands' expectations about race and social justice, Black

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influencers must demonstrate their authenticity in ways that are starkly different from their white counterparts. In short, the extent to which a Black influencer hails or leans into their Blackness becomes an adequate measure of their authenticity, one that is particularly lucrative for brands.

For potential brand partners, Black influencers who are particularly relatable present a lucrative opportunity to reach Black consumers. Much of the B2B press underscores the importance of working with Black influencers in terms of its capital potential. Industry agents, media outlets, and Black influencers remind brands that Black markets spend $1.3 trillion annually, a share which can be partially captured by working with Black influencers (Canty, 2020; Eferighe, 2020; Tenise, 2019). Framed as a way to foster stronger and further-reaching brand loyalty among Black consumers, one *Adweek* article discusses partnerships with Black influencers as an efficient and lucrative method of growing a company's clientele (Canty, 2020). Although the article explicitly mentions that the Black influencer in question should fit with the brand's mission and particular industry, it repeatedly uses the word "authentic" and "genuine" to describe influencers who adequately represent Black communities and "African American culture" (Canty, 2020). In the Ozy article discussed earlier in this section, Eferighe (2020) likewise notes that Black creators are now "critical for marketers who are trying to target an African American audience that for decades was seen as secondary at best." Not only does Eferighe's (2020) quote insinuate the niche or specialized nature of Black influencer content by way of their identity, but it also positions Black influencers as gateways to

"tight-knit" Black communities by leveraging the trust and intimacy they have built with their followers over time (Eferighe, 2020).

In addition to mapping what makes partnerships with Black influencers so economically promising, several popular press and B2B articles cite Black culture as a necessary and representative element that should be incorporated alongside work with Black influencers. Canty (2020) notes:

> By aligning with an African American influencer, the individual brings their personal background to the campaign as the target audience can assimilate more with the culture brought to the campaign. In order for brands to drive purchase decisions via influencers, their campaign needs to convey an authentic message that an African American audience can proudly support […] Authentic messages from a brand's influencers are critical to raising not only the brand's credibility but also deepening the connection with the African American community (Canty, 2020).

For Black influencers, their racial identity becomes a marker of their suitability for a particular brand campaign, and their ability to "embrace African American culture" becomes a criterion for potential partnerships (Eferighe, 2020). The subtext of the quote above indicates that Black influencers are still largely viewed as a homogenous group from which brands can cherry pick ideal partners to diversify their public image while appealing to Black markets, provided they choose a Black creator who adequately embodies recognizable aspects of Black culture (Canty, 2020). Moreover, it frames the careful selection of the most appropriate Black influencer as the means and end to capturing Black markets – there is no mention of employing Black influencers long-term, using them as brand ambassadors, or taking time to understand their following as part of the process necessary to begin connecting with Black audiences.

The media discourse about Black influencers sheds light on how race becomes a measure by which influencers are evaluated by potential brand partners. The B2B press offers advice about how to locate and work with Black influencers, identifying influencers who "do" racial justice or speak on Black issues as ideal figures to incorporate into brand campaigns (Canty, 2020; Eferighe, 2020; Thomas, 2021). Black influencers quoted in the popular press describe the difficulty in securing brand deals when asked to adhere to a particular image (e.g. how to wear their hair, which clothes they wear, etc.) and give advice to aspiring Black influencers that encourages them to "stay true" to themselves by refusing to compromise their own values, identity, or personal style to do so (Thomas, 2021). Outward expressions of Blackness are used to determine whether a Black influencer is a useful partner for reaching Black consumers, yet cultural and phenotypical Black features are regulated by brands attempting to edit Black influencers' appearance to serve their own ends. In this way, recognizably Black features, aesthetics, or involvement in racial justice is presented as a reliable part of the selection process yet the Black body is still subject to regulation and depoliticization to create a more palatable version of Blackness for consumers.

Apart from an influencer's individual content or how brands perceive potential partnerships, other media work to verify Black influencers' authenticity. For example, one Refinery29 video spotlights Cyndee Black as she shares the items she always carries with her in her purse. The items are pretty ordinary: makeup, a chunky wallet, a bullet journal, sunglasses, etc. This format is relatively new but also familiar, similar to GQ's 'can't live without' series where celebrities bring in their go-to and most beloved items.

Highlighting what Black keeps in her bag is certainly an exercise in authenticity, humanizing her in demonstrating that she's just like anyone else by virtue of carrying familiar, everyday necessities in her purse. There are a few quirky items in tow such as some colored rocks which allow Black to showcase her unique qualities by providing a short, fascinating backstory for the item in question. Being relatable and unique have been noted as integral to developing a personal brand in the popular press articles about Black influencers.

Although companies and audiences are told to view Black influencers in terms of their racial identity, Black influencers adopt a different approach to developing an authentic persona in their work. The blog for social media management tool, Later, includes an article about the lack of diversity in influencer marketing. In the article, Thomas (2021) interviews Black influencers who note that brands often approach them with disingenuous intentions and regularly undervalue their labor; subsequently, they prefer working with Black-owned businesses that allow them to "be themselves" and create more authentic content. When asked to give advice to upcoming Black influencers, most of the interviewees suggest maintaining authenticity through posting "relatable" content and being highly selective when choosing brand partners, ensuring to work with companies that hold compatible values to avoid tokenism, if possible (A, interview, 2021; Sky, interview, 2021). One of my interviewees, Devyn, similarly cites being oneself as being an actionable and necessary path forward for Black creators:

> Even though I'm not representative of, like, all Black women because we
> all have different experiences, I feel like it's still important to just push
> that message forward of just being yourself and, you know, the right
> people will follow (Devyn, interview, 2022).

Coupled with the advice Black influencers gave in the Later article, Devyn's

quote demonstrates how being relatable or "authentic" for Black creators is more about

breaking down stereotypical notions of who Black influencers are and what they do and

is less about neoliberal, post-feminist sentiments about authenticity which further reveals

how Black creators do not internalize these logics in the same way as has been described

in much of the literature on influencing which focuses largely on white creators

(Marwick, 2013; Duffy, 2015).

For Black influencers, part of presenting oneself as authentic includes portraying

oneself as a unique individual rather than part of a racially singular monolith. One

Medium article spotlights eleven Black influencers and what they want brands to know

before reaching out to partner with them (Campbell, 2020). Most of their responses

allude to authenticity, whether it be asserting that any partnership honors the influencer's

unique style, personality, or how they sound or asking brands to reflect on their sincerity

before contacting a Black influencer to propose a collaboration. Influencer JaLisa

Vaughn tells brands: "Don't try to water us down, let us be who we are when hiring us to

do a job" (Campbel, 2020). Similarly, another common theme among the influencers

being quoted in the column is recognizing Black influencers not as "the Black influencer"

but as a diverse group of people with wildly different interests, audiences, and platforms.

Lifestyle and beauty influencer Courtney Danielle writes:

> We are dynamic and we each bring something to the table that is unique
> and refreshing. We all come from different backgrounds, family dynamics,
> and have our own personal preferences. Don't let societal constructs dictate
> what it will be like to cast a Black influencer for a campaign. Don't use
> Black influencers to just check a diversity box and expect that token Black

influencer to represent all of us. It is imperative to truly grasp that we are a dynamic people and in order to represent us they need to cast Black influencers that vary in complexion, shape, style, and all the aspects that make a person unique so that they can truly speak to a diverse audience (Campbell, 2020).

The implication here is that uniqueness and authenticity are not afforded to Black content creators because they play a token role for many brands and companies looking to visually diversify their image. As such, Black influencers can create an air of authenticity by working to portray themselves as individuals, evidenced through Cyndee Black's appearance on Refinery29, rather than as part of a singular, totalizing whole that is Black influencers.

Apart from producing content that is individually relatable, some Black influencers curate their authenticity by addressing social justice on their respective platforms. In one *Huffington Post* article, Black influencers are described as "thought leaders" for consumers who want to "align themselves with brands committed to ending racial oppression" (Di Donato, 2020). Brittany Bright, the CEO of The Influencer League, is quoted throughout the piece and says that when Black influencers promote human rights and initiate conversations about race, it "puts humanity behind [their] content," which implies that Black influencers appear more relatable and authentic when they explicitly address racial inequality (Di Donato, 2020). Di Donato (2020) also addresses the fear and uncertainty Black influencers face when deciding whether to use their platforms for activism; on one hand, doing so can attract likeminded brands and followers, yet being a digital Black activist in the public eye produces its own anxieties and vulnerabilities.

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Yet, the struggle to curate and maintain authenticity as a Black influencer is still laden with self-governing neoliberal logics which posit authenticity as profitable. Miriam Musa, the first Black influencer to develop and launch a solo fashion collection with company ISAWITFIRST as their brand ambassador, serves as one such example. Opening with the line "Black girl magic is global!" the website Because of Them We Can – a site that showcases Black history and excellence – charts Musa's rise in the influencing community and ends with some inspirational words that encourage young Black women to pursue their dreams because "nothing is too big or too crazy to achieve" (BOTWC Staff, 2020). This is the very logic that substantiates aspirational labor and encourages citizens to adopt an entrepreneurial spirit in pursuit of celebrity, status, and capital. Authenticity plays a key role in actualizing those dreams, evidenced in Musa's assertion that the collection "is a clear reflection of my character" (BOTWC Staff, 2020). Here, the rhetoric of staying true to yourself – implicitly, being relatable – becomes a measure by which to gage the likelihood of success in the influencing field.

Although appearing authentic in one's content is critical to influencing work, Black influencers are also subverting scholarly ideas about aspirational labor. Duffy (2015) claims that authenticity masks the consumerist, capitalist logics that undergird and necessitate influencing work, but Black influencers express their authenticity in distinct ways. For instance, when asked what makes a post or video relatable or authentic, several of the influencers I interviewed indicated that explicitly acknowledging the heavily edited and curated nature of their content is a great place to start. One interviewee stated that she strives to remind her followers that while her life may look "perfect" or "easy," it is far

from it (A, interview, 2021). She regularly details the mental and emotional burden of the work she does, the sheer amount of time she spends creating content, and how there have been ramifications in her personal life based on what she has chosen to include in her content (A, interview, 2021). When asked what motivated each of them to take up influencing in the first place, several of my interviewees cited racial inclusion as a primary factor. My interviewee, Lauren, stated that she wanted to raise awareness about biracial identity, specifically, to validate biracial users and to demonstrate that "we exist" to people who think about or encounter biracial identity less often (Lauren, interview, 2021).

Other influencers similarly discussed the importance of representation in what they do, making clear connections between the lack of representation in influencing work and the wage gap affecting Black content creators. The notion of representation and identity adopts less individualizing logics than is typically associated with aspirational labor; rather than solely pursuing their dreams and passions, Black influencers are partially motivated to enter this precarious commercial space because of what their presence will do for other Black women and people. This more collective understanding of digital labor's consequences and the explicit connection to systemic issues even within an incredibly individualized market (e.g. the wage gap) makes the logics of aspirational labor fit less well among Black content creators. Fueled by a desire to right systemic issues that extend to digital labor and to draw attention to lived Black experience, Black content creators subvert the enterprising, neoliberal logic of authenticity as a distraction from the precarity of influencing work.

Voice and the Precarity of Hypervisibility

For Black women, their digital presence is characterized by hypervisibility, or the voyeuristic gaze which renders Black women uniquely vulnerable to being "insulted, weighed, and isolated" on digital platforms and in cultural spheres (Harry, 2014; Noble, 2013). Although the "intersectional Internet" has provided methods for analyzing how power dynamics are embedded in digital platforms and technologies and is often used by digital feminists, scholars, and activists to account for Black women's experiences, the reality of those experiences online is not fully acknowledged or appreciated (Noble & Tynes, 2016). Scholars note that much of digital feminism is characterized by white feminism in both content and authorship which partly explains why Black women's unique experiences are not fully captured in discourse about feminism (Daniels, 2015; Williams, 2015; Noble & Tynes, 2016).

Although the intersectional Internet exists as a way of speaking about the more prominent and accessible discussions about identity online, digital users engaged in discourse about identity on platforms like Tumblr do not always consider how Black women navigate discriminatory practices facilitated by digital platforms. For instance, a considerable portion of the Tumblr discourse focuses on Black women's representation in media, sharing Black feminist thought through digital copies of bell hooks' works, and bringing forgotten Black histories to light. Very little of that discourse focuses explicitly on the unique types of discrimination enabled by digital technologies, such as Ndlovu's insights about Instagram's algorithm which disproportionately affects plus-sized Black bodies or how "being on display for public consumption" online invites immediate and

disproportional scrutiny (Devyn, interview, 2022; Schiffer, 2020). One interviewee, T,

explains the mental exhaustion that accompanies trying to manage audience expectations

amid algorithms that prioritize genres or types of content that differ from her own as a

"mommy blogger":

> On pretty much every platform, you're rewarded for showing up regularly
> […] my first responsibility is being a stay at home mom, so it's my family
> […] I don't always have time to post on my stories all day long or to
> create new content on social media, and I definitely am not always
> consistent on my blog […] people have decided that they want to follow
> you, and they want to, um, share in your experience and a lot of times they
> want to be able to consume that content daily (T, interview, 2022).

The expectation T feels to be available and consistent with her content becomes

its own challenge she must navigate, particularly in 2020 after receiving an influx of new,

content-hungry followers. She adds that the algorithm on Instagram currently "likes

Reelz and stories" and more video-based entertainment than her more informative written

work on her blog which de-prioritizes her own work (T, interview, 2022). While some

attention is paid to the more frequent or varied sexist and racist 'hate mail' Black women

may receive in their digital inboxes, less is afforded to the way Black women are forced

to relive racialized trauma and combat the commodification of their bodies in such a

publicly visible and visceral way online.

The kinds of discrimination Black women face offline are not only replicated on

digital platforms, but greatly exacerbate it. To better explain how Black women are

forced to grapple with their commodification and subjugation online, the term

"misogynoir" draws attention to racialized tensions with more precision to more

effectively articulate Black women's experiences relative to the intersectional Internet

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and the appropriation of Black women's "technocultural capital" (Bailey, 2013; Brock, 2012). In interviews with media outlets, Black influencers expressed their conflicted feelings following the George Floyd protests during which many saw a sharp increase in their following. In several pop press articles I analyzed, multiple influencers described the experience as a "double-edged sword" and felt as though they were "capitalizing on Black tragedy" due to their success in 2020 (McNeal, 2020; Wooden, 2020). The influencers explained that their inboxes were flooded with largely white followers inquiring how to be a better ally or initiate discussions about racial justice even though many of these influencers had never incorporated activism or racial justice into their content previously. Several felt pressured to speak about Black Lives Matter or internally grappled with the underlying assumption that Black women *want* to educate white audiences and subsequently faced backlash from new followers when they refused to do so (Lauren, interview, 2021; McNeal, 2020; Wooden, 2020).

One of my interviewees, Lauren, recalls her own sharp increase in white followers during summer 2020 and the external and self-imposed expectations to create content focused more explicitly on her racial identity:

> I think I do have some pressure to, like, only talk about my identity
> because that's what so many people have followed me for, especially
> recently […] I have this pressure to talk about my identity which is how I
> navigate life, like, it's very valid, but I don't want it to be my whole thing
> […] You notice that those things perform better (Lauren, interview, 2021).

This quote illustrates the tensions Black influencers navigate in the wake of the George Floyd protests. In addition to servicing new, largely white followers who want to learn more about race or demonstrate support by following influencers of color, Black

creators are also forced to reckon with their racial identity as a factor that fundamentally shapes their being. Where Lauren acknowledges that the pressure to discuss her racial identity is simply part of how she moves through life and work, the decisions Black influencers must make regarding how to outwardly express their identity for (white) audiences expecting content centered on race are particularly evident in the publicly visible, competitive terrain of influencing where one's identity serves as a marker of their ability to attract followers and brand partners alike.

Many Black influencers felt deeply conflicted about their sharp increase in followers following the George Floyd protests and Blackout Tuesday, unsure what to make of the sudden influx of largely white followers (McNeal, 2020). In one BuzzFeed article about the protests, influencer Ayanna Lage recalls "gain[ing] 32,000 followers in seven days" but finds her success bittersweet: "I want to say I feel proud of myself, but it feels strange when I think about what spurred people to action" (McNeal, 2020). Some influencers feel compelled to post explicitly about race even if their content is not typically activist in nature and subsequently find themselves arguing with new white followers about their viewpoints on racial justice (McNeal, 2020). Another influencer quoted in the piece, Carmeon Hamilton, found herself questioning why she received so many followers, wondering whether "they really just hit 'follow' because I'm Black" and if they truly enjoy her regular, less-political content (McNeal, 2020). Rather than following Black influencers who produce content in which they may be genuinely interested, white users were following Black influencers in mass, the assumption being that following any and all Black influencers will do the trick.

Black influencers also cite the emotional burden of being forced to handle white fragility following their growing audiences during the George Floyd protests. Specifically, Black influencers note the influx of white guilt flooding their inboxes, receiving "a ton of messages […] asking about race and arguing with [them] about things [they] said about racial justice (McNeal, 2020). Lage concludes that she does not "think [Black influencers] can prepare to be in a headspace where [they] suddenly are getting hundreds or even thousands of strangers wanting [their] perspective" (McNeal, 2020). Tokenism shapes these discussions as white followers seek out Black influencers to diversify their feed in response to the push from media outlets and Black communities to support them without taking the time to first educate themselves or ask which Black influencers make the most sense for them to follow. The uncertainty surrounding whether these new followers would have found and followed them otherwise reveals the added practical and emotional concerns Black influencers must navigate in their work.

The precarity of hypervisibility is evident among Black influencers who spoke out about George Floyd and BLM. From Carmeon Hamilton's experience with white followers arguing with her about her own perspective on racial justice to monitoring her speech online "because I was feeling very conscious of what I said, which is new," the spotlight under which media companies had pinned her became a microscope, one white audiences used to interrogate her about her views on race (McNeal, 2020). In the same article, influencer Deena Knight expressed similar concerns, noting how "incredibly emotionally and physiologically exhausting it is to keep up with the demands of new followers (McNeal, 2020). In this way, Black influencers are continually "subjugated

to," forced to feel and witness the voyeuristic nature of Black tragedy amid the onslaught of white followers and media outlets vying for their words, opinions, and feelings about something that happens in their communities every day. Emanating from the history of slavery and the resultant inherited trauma that pulsates within Black communities, the act – or even request – of being Black and processing George Floyd's murder for all the digital sphere to watch and evaluate forces Black influencers to retraumatize themselves, their words and emotions fodder for public discourses so that white audiences can make sense of the event for themselves (Hartman, 1997). By using the Black body as a shield to processes racism and Black tragedy, white audiences afford themselves the luxury of distance at the expense of Black women's well-being.

Other cultural critics investigate the consequences of continually dealing with race on Black influencers' mental and emotional states. In an article for the beauty subscription service Ipsy, marketer and freelance writer Gabrielle Wooden (2020) details a one-on-one interview with Aja White, a Black beauty influencer who received a sudden influx in followers after the George Floyd protests. Similar to the influencers in McNeal's (2020) piece, White explores her mixed feelings about garnering so much attention as a direct result of highly publicized racial violence. Like others, White uses the term "double-edged" sword to describe the tension between maintaining focus on her beauty-related content and feeling compelled to speak out about racial injustice on her platform (Wooden, 2020). Knight similarly states that she does not "want [her] full-time job to be focused on racial justice," referencing the pressure from white users and media companies to discuss race in times of controversy despite the content she generally

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(enjoys) producing (McNeal, 2020). White offers advice about cultivating the mental fortitude needed to navigate such situations to aspiring Black influencers, assuring them that their voices are more than enough and should not feel pressured to address racial justice or Black tragedy longer than they feel comfortable doing (Wooden, 2020).

Mental health was a recurring subject in the interviews I conducted with Black influencers and creators and how Black women are rarely afforded the luxury to feel or process their emotions in peace. In terms of content creation, Lauren sometimes makes slight changes to her content across platforms in ways that better represent various aspects of her identity apart from an explicit focus on race, citing a specific example:

> There's a [Instagram] reel I just posted doing my makeup, and the audio I have on Tik Tok was a little bit different. [The audio] was talking about […] people of color and indigenous people and who their ancestors were in a voiceover, and instead I just changed it to a song on Instagram. I do appreciate other music and other things, but I know that it probably would have gotten more shares if I were to keep that other audio. But, it was just, like, an empowering decision for me to share something else I liked (Lauren, interview, 2021).

Lauren continued in our interview that she frequently experiences "burnout" and will sometimes make content like the posts described above that allow her to express herself more freely or "take a break" from ongoing conversations about race, even if it means sacrificing likes and shares to do so (Lauren, interview, 2021).

My interview with Devyn was especially revealing in terms of the precarious position in which Black creators often themselves. Devyn, who works primarily on YouTube, explains that "sharing through video is very intimate […] it's a lot easier to encompass who you are [but] it's hard to know when to be authentic and to be vulnerable" (Devyn, interview, 2022). Because Devyn focuses explicitly on mental and

emotional health in her work, often reflecting on her own, she is rendered uniquely vulnerable to audience scrutiny. She notes that followers have called her content "depressing," sometimes accusing her of attention-seeking when she shares how her own struggles "really unfold" (Devyn, interview, 2022). She states that "people have lower levels of empathy for Black female creators," noting the distinct differences between Black women's ability to be openly emotive and their white counterparts (Devyn, interview, 2022). She explains that white influencers who similarly open up about personal issues or mental health struggles they face online are "given a lot more space to be" whereas Black creators are "put on this pedestal and expected to be this, like, model citizen even though that's not what [we] signed up for" (Devyn, interview, 2022). Devyn's powerful account of her own – and others' – struggle with hypervisibility shaped much of our conversation about her experiences as a Black creator. This experience highlights the double-standard to which Black influencers are often held, expected to limit their emotional honesty or hide their own very real and deeply felt struggles lest they jeopardize their viewership in doing so.

Other interviewees similarly made a point to describe what they do to balance their mental and emotional health even without my prompting them to do so or focused on how difficult it can be to stay motivated during a time of social and political upheaval. Tara notes that although she "wasn't monetized" in 2020 "the views were great" (Tara, interview, 2022). Like A, however, Tara quickly noticed that the decline in 2021 was due to a couple of things," alluding to the pandemic and the protests (Tara, interview, 2022). She reflects on her own mental struggles to keep producing content, citing the pressure to

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make "searchable content rather than the content [she] enjoyed" amid these circumstances (Tara, interview, 2022). Another interviewee, Liz, encourages Black creators to adopt a more unapologetic approach when guarding their mental and emotional health:

> There's a lot of influencers whose stories I'll watch, and say they disappear off of stories for a couple of days […] They feel the need to come back and explain why they're gone, and I'm just, like, that's unnecessary […] at the end of the day, you're still a person with stuff that you need to deal with. There has to be a line that you draw (Liz, interview, 2022).

Liz's example emphasizes Black creators' humanity, validating their need to take breaks or step away from what might be going on in the world or in their personal lives. Although several of the influencers I interviewed similarly shared their own strategies and approaches for addressing their mental health and setting clear boundaries with what/how they share with followers, maintaining those boundaries can still be a challenge.

The unique challenges Black influencers face in maintaining healthy boundaries goes beyond mitigating the lines between what is private and what is public given their work on social media platforms, and instead is much more about what they can handle from white followers, particularly during 2020. Influencers like Aja White grapple with the notion that by virtue of being Black, they are expected to address race or racial justice when tragedy strikes. In her interview with Wooden (2020), White notes that when "George Floyd's death happened […] suddenly there [were] new opportunities for all of these Black people" specifically because they are Black. While the rest of the country clamored to process George Floyd's murder, Black influencers were expected to do so on

their behalf and in public view of audiences who are unable or unwilling to process it on their own by virtue of their racial identity.

Returning to the pop press pieces I examined earlier, both McNeal (2020) and Weil McKinley (2020) draw attention to the sheer emotional burden and psychological toll Black influencers face when handling white followers looking to learn about race and allyship. Knight admitted that she wanted to return to posting her original content, "but also feels a responsibility to share her truth as a Black woman" (McNeal, 2020). As brands and white followers demand their perspectives about racial justice, Black influencers wrestle with how and which narratives they share with followers. Coupled with the concept of hypervisibility, maintaining agency in one's voice and digital persona is a unique challenge for Black women particularly in the wake of the George Floyd protests. Met with expectations from white followers and major brands alike, Black influencers have had their personas, their content, and their voices framed as antiracist or as valuable contributors to popular discussions about race, some of which may be unwarranted or unwanted.

In a particularly interesting turn, other pop press pieces identify Black influencers as a source of self-care for general audiences, providing them with a "necessary pick-me-up" amid civil unrest to quote an E! Online article released at the start of Black History Month in 2021 (Ray, 2021). Positioning Black influencers as a way for readers to cheer themselves up and rejuvenate themselves in the wake of COVID-19 and the George Floyd protests seems a well-intentioned yet dismissive direction which glosses over the way Black influencers and communities have been disproportionately affected by those

very situations. In Weil McKinley's (2020) piece with PopSugar, readers are encouraged to "read on to be inspired" by the plus-sized Black activists detailed in the article. Likewise, Ray (2020) describes influencers as pinnacles of "Black excellence" who are particularly inspiring, making racial exceptionalism an integral part of what Black influencers do and what they represent. Most of the descriptions accompanying each influencer include phrases like "[y]ou will leave their account smiling, we promise" and describe their content as a "warm hug," really playing up the idea that Black influencers can offer followers emotional security and pleasure (Ray, 2021). Such a perspective betrays the ignorance of white audiences and media outlets which prioritize the need for white audiences to uplift themselves during a global pandemic and amid civil and racial unrest at the expense of Black women's mental and emotional well-being.

Conclusion

As evidenced in much of the media discourse about Black influencers, their bodies are censored, commodified, and appropriated toward explicitly capitalist ends. Racial identity becomes a commodity in itself as brands use token talent to round out their campaigns and promotional materials, and Black influencers provide lucrative avenues for accessing growing Black markets. Their bodies are subject to regulation in both influencing and other industries which have historically failed to include them in commercial spheres. In particular, the B2B press about influencer marketing and beauty companies reveal how Black bodies are subject to both scrutiny and regulation before being permitted to compete alongside their white counterparts. In addition to brands who can appeal to both Black and younger generations of consumers, Black influencers are

useful insofar as they service white audiences by being a resource in times of controversy. Positioned as 'activists' who are ready and willing to speak about racial justice, Black influencer traverse a fraught politics of representation that unduly burdens them with additional mental and emotional pressures.

For Black influencers, their bodies, voices, and emotions are subject to greater regulation and criticism than their white counterparts. As racialized Others, Black influencers are unfairly tasked with greater emotional commitments and demands for education that white influencers will simply never experience. The burden of struggling for privacy and respect in highly visible, commercial spaces is doubly felt by Black influencers who bodies are made both intelligible and permissible through consumption. In an effort to diversify their image and feeds, respectively, brands and digital users have further commodified Black bodies, using them to extract brand value, cultural and economic capital, and to process racial trauma. In this way, Black influencers are more precariously positioned and must work harder for their own autonomy, fighting to carve space for alternative and less totalizing conceptions about what they have to offer digital audiences.

Although Black influencers must necessarily navigate additional tensions in ways that make their experience distinct from white influencers, Black creators are necessarily pursuing venture labor which renders them newly and differently vulnerable to systemic capitalist forces. Because Black influencers are disproportionately women, their consumer subjectivities are raced and gendered, and neoliberal logics urge them to pursue their passions in spaces that promise merit-based success unencumbered by traditional

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gender and racial constraints. Notions of what it means to be a Black woman and what success can look like in the digital era shape the way Black influencers understand their relationship to the competitive and precarious work of influencing. For Black creators, their racial, gender, and class identities influence and challenge how neoliberal logics about life and work take root.

CHAPTER 7

ANALYSIS:

RACIALIZED NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITIES AND GENDERED EXCELLENCE

> Black women are given the crumbs of crumbs. But we're expected to be so much. [and] it doesn't end. Some days I just get so overwhelmed trying to exist, but there's one thing I can count on – my own ability to build the life I want down to every inch […] Everywhere I have to work. And defend myself. And fix things. And try to matter. So when I earn money? I repair myself (butterflikisses, 2021).

Taken from a Twitter thread which was reposted as a series of screencaps on Tumblr, this quote reveals enterprising, capitalist logics and the way Black women both internalize and challenge neoliberal ideas about labor, happiness, and the motivation to 'hustle.' Influencing is predicated on neoliberal logics which instruct individuals to understand themselves as commodities. The individualization of labor amid competitive capitalist markets centers the individual as the sole arbiter of their own success, often defined in terms of one's ability to accrue economic and cultural capital. Because the primary focus of neoliberal labor is the individual, differences along lines of race, gender, class, ability, and others are leveled out in favor of the mantra that all individuals are equally able and encouraged to reinvigorate the market with their own unique ideas. Within such a market, individuals are told success is determined based on their merits and the amount of time and energy they are willing to expend toward that end. The logic of individualization erases systemic racism and sexism, diverting attention away from the inherently racist structures which govern and move the market while promising consumers and individual actors paths to improve their circumstances through economic mobility.

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Although the work of influencing is a largely individual and competitive endeavor, individuals can gain cultural and financial success for themselves, inspiring others to aspire to similar paths and encouraging participation in this precarious form of digital labor. However, the focus on individualization has historically been more accessible to white individuals. In pop press articles from both *Medium* and *Essence*, a familiar narrative emerges concerning the way Black communities should be 'addressed' which includes incentivizing Black individuals to rise above their circumstances and achieve academic or financial success (La Negra, 2018; Underwood, 2019). Thus, the concept of Black excellence provides a useful language for understanding how Black individuals are encouraged to adopt American bootstrap rhetoric and attain that success in ways that reflect positively on Black communities as a whole. Black excellence shaped a considerable portion of the media discourse about Black influencers, pitting them as intelligent, enterprising individuals who successfully rose above their stations and 'made it' in this incredibly competitive line of work. Indeed, Black excellence is a productive tool for unpacking how neoliberal governmentality, while still present, apply differently to Black actors operating within the confines of an aggressive capitalist market.

Black Excellence as an Iteration of White Standards of Success

Rooted in W.E.B. DuBois' iteration of Black exceptionalism, Black excellence refers to Black individuals who display incredible talents and abilities that "make the [B]lack community proud," taken from an Urban Dictionary entry on the phrase (Urban Dictionary, 2017). Like the website Because of Them We Can, another site explicitly titled Black Excellence is dedicated to showcasing Black talent and success, positioning

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Black excellence as an outgrowth of exploitation whereby Black communities have been forced to equip themselves with the tools and skills to better their circumstances and environments. The very notion of Black excellence is a good example of what Brock (2020) calls "Black digital practice" as Black communities often use the phrase and its hashtag form to understand and communicate Black subjectivities on their own terms. On digital platforms, non-Black users encounter and are free to use the tag to similarly engage versions of Black success. According to the Urban Dictionary definition and the aforementioned websites I examined, Black excellence is not solely encapsulated by individual success stories but necessarily includes nurturing Black communities through service and investment. The process of bettering Black communities is contextualized as a form of self-help here which offers an interesting connection to the self-help style discourses in neoliberal logics and entrepreneurial labor such as influencing. Gill and Scharff (2013) discuss self-improvement discourses among young female influencers, noting the gendered nature of such logics which instruct young women to improve their circumstances through body-based improvements such as diet, exercise, and meditation. Black excellence itself is also quite gendered though that dimension is often obscured because the phrase operates as a totalizing ideal for the Black Community™ writ large.

The narrative of Black excellence serves as an inspiring one for Black communities who are continually subjugated by systemic racism and often provides a point of connection for Black peoples across the globe whose shared diasporic history shapes their collective present. In an article published to *Time* magazine's website, British-Ugandan poet and activist George the Poet asserts Black Britons and Black

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Americans can culturally identify with one another in a way that white America and white Britain fail to do. Using his own experiences as illustrative examples, George the Poet (2020) states: "our position in the economy is preventing us from building momentum against the effects of racism." For George the Poet, bolstering Black achievement across industry spheres such as music, sports, and entertainment provides a path to unify Black populations across continents and reclaim space and power by "playing to our strengths and reinvesting our diverse skill sets" (George the Poet, 2020). This mindset universalizes Black existence, and although the ends are noble, doing so erases the specific history of why Black peoples are typically associated with spheres of work and play that commodify the Black body.

Moreover, George the Poet (2020) pushes for Black individuals to capitalize on talents they 'already possess' and downplays the possibility of branching out into other contexts such as science and academia, arguing "that no industry has had a greater influence on race politics than entertainment." George the Poet's assertion is contrary to what other pop press coverage about Black excellence typically identify as the optimal path to true success (La Negra, 2018; Mushimiyimana, 2016; Williams, 2020; Underwood, 2019). The notion that Black individuals should focus on exceling in fields for which they have natural talent glosses over Black individuals whose talents and interests lie elsewhere; in this way, Black excellence is also being used to draw boundaries around which careers and spheres 'make sense' for Black people to pursue. Implicitly, earning a doctoral degree in STEM is not considered a naturally or fittingly Black career, reinforcing the longstanding, racist narrative that Black people are best

suited to more physical and embodied types of labor (e.g. sports and entertainment) rather than higher-ordered ones dependent on intellect (e.g. becoming scientists and professors). Such an argument echoes a few key tenets Booker T. Washington stressed in the Atlanta Compromise and his other work where he pointed to trade schools and craftsmanship as the most viable path to Black success and equality (Washington, 1901). Coupled with more critical forms of engagement with the concept of exceptionalism in pop press pieces from *Essence*, Refinery29, and *Medium*, elements of the Washington-Dubois debate reappear amid conversations about George Floyd, the demonstrations, and supporting Black communities long-term (Fapuro, 2020; La Negra, 2018; Underwood, 2019; Williams, 2020). In this way, discourse about Black influencers of which Black excellence is a part also work to re-shape and reinforce limited definitions of Blackness that center the Black body and its natural abilities.

Understanding Black influencers in terms of Black excellence paints a totalizing picture of Black communities by placing "whiteness at its axis" as a racialized standard by which Black people and influencers must attain success in adhering to a dichotomy firmly rooted in prevailing stereotypes about Black identity (Williams, 2020). In a self-reflective piece written for Refinery29, Fapuro (2020) integrates her experiences as a Black woman in law into a critical exposé about Black excellence, stating:

> My visibility makes it feel like I have unwillingly consented to amplifying a standard of Black excellence that just doesn't seem attainable […] I've previously warned against prominent Black voices becoming 'authorities of Blackness' and the need to counter the homogenisation of Black experiences to ensure that individuality does not remain a privilege of whiteness (Fapuro, 2020).

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Fapuro (2020) writes that working as a lawyer, doctor, media personality, or public intellectual is viewed as the height of success for Black individuals but glosses over the frequently demanding, competitive environment in which those individuals must learn and work often at the expense of their mental and emotional health. In this way, the narrative of success is meant to serve the Black community rather than the individual, reiterating the sentiment that Black people are most easily understood as part of a larger whole.

The notion that Black individuals' successes are meant to reflect positively on their community raises questions of the extent to which Black peoples' individuality is acknowledged at all. Fapuro (2020) uses interviews with Black influencers and professionals to substantiate her argument that Black excellence reveals the "reluctance to allow Black people access to their own humanity" through their exceptionalism. Cultural and financial success in lucrative professional and academic careers historically populated by white individuals reinforces the narrative that it is difficult for most Black people to ever achieve such feats. Alongside discussions of imposter syndrome and Black women's mental health issues, Fapuro (2020) notes that exceptionalism "has become compensation for […] Blackness in white spaces." The treatment of exceptionalism in this piece echoes W. E. B. DuBois' core argument in *The Talented Tenth* that only the top-tier, top-performing, and most intelligent Black people (roughly 10% of the entire racial category) are capable of and *deserving* of the chance to enter academia and professional work (Du Bois, 1903). Like Williams (2020) and Mushimiyimana (2016) writing for digital media companies like *Medium* and Blavity, culture journalist Fapuro

(2020) acknowledges that Black excellence homogenizes the Black experience, failing to consider how class and gender complicate expectations for achieving normative standards of success.

Ideas about Black excellence and why it is worth pursuing may be rooted in Black communities in response to slavery's devastating consequences but understanding what it means to be Black and how to excel despite it are not limited to community-based criteria. In an op-ed piece for the Black-run and targeted magazine *Essence*, writer Steven Underwood (2019) writes about the central tenet of Black excellence:

> It is the idea that by virtue of being Black, we are gifted, burdened or obligated to excel. Anything short of one's best is a divergent off the straight and narrow set up for us by whatever generation suffered before us – and a dishonor to what we owe them (Underwood, 2019).

Underwood (2019) explicitly mentions W. E. B. DuBois' *The Talented Tenth* as the origin of Black excellence and its current "mutated form." Discussing intergenerational survivor's guilt and the pressure to succeed for ancestral pride, Underwood (2019) maps how Black excellence has definitively affected mental health in Black communities, especially for Black women who face unique pressures of sexism and racism in achieving professional success in ways that validate their existence (Fapuro, 2020). Here, Black excellence is best defined by what it is not: failure, which has come to include mediocrity. The article asserts that the toxic logics of such rhetoric are exacerbated by media such as *the Read*, *Dear White People*, and *GROWN-ISH*, explicitly acknowledging how media amplify messages about what it means to succeed as a Black person.

Although Black excellence corroborates Black success against white standards for all Black individuals, the white standards to which Black women are held are particularly evident. In an op-ed for Blavity, a Black media company, writer Yvette Mushimiyimana (2016) recounts her experience following influencers and social media personalities who share her interests in travel and fashion but are overwhelmingly white. She considers this experience alongside the notion of Black excellence following her decision to purposefully follow Black-authored accounts of similar topics. Mushimiyimana (2016) notes that Black excellence pressures Black individuals to aspire to "greater heights" and prove themselves in white spaces, often "constraining" the ability to cultivate their identities on their own terms. Like Fapuro (2020) and Underwood (2019), Mushimiyimana (2016) discusses self-love in conjunction with Black excellence, but the overarching assumption is that Black women specifically are held to normative standards of whiteness, particularly in lifestyle settings and media.

> If there was a beautiful dress that I loved, it was a white person wearing it. If someone was in an eccentric home, it was a white person living in it. If there was a person who was giving some tips on a new workout, it was a fit white person giving it. If there was a photo of someone traveling to Turkey, it was a white person going there (Mushimiyimana, 2016).

Here, Mushimiyimana's (2016) example about the sheer number of white female influencers demonstrates that Black women are not intuitive to the 'leisurely' activities of travel and fashion which are white endeavors by default. The same sentiment can also be applied to the presence of white beauty vloggers, hailing the history of racist beauty standards that often preclude Black women altogether, especially dark-skinned Black women and those who are less racially ambiguous. In this way, success as a Black

influencer is partly articulated through a Black woman's ability to replicate whiteness, or

at the very least, curb her inherent Blackness as evidenced in the media discourse that

draws attention to the uneven nature of Black excellence and success (Stevens, 2021).

For Black women, the narrative of Black exceptionalism is wrapped up with both

neoliberal and post-feminist discourses about labor and success. The focus on female

empowerment and recognizing the individual merits of Black women who compete and

succeed in white spaces functions as a way to combat prevailing stereotypes about Black

women (Cheers, 2017; Collins, 2005; Spillers, 1987). In order to distance themselves

from the sexually threatening nature of the jezebel stereotype or the caricatured

domineering matriarch or mammy, Black women leverage their individual talents to

aspire to white standards of success. One *Medium* article recognizes these tensions,

stating that Black people are subject to particular pressures which tell them that:

> [T]o eradicate racism, they have to work twice as hard, be smarter, be
> better, act better. Only after they have given 150%, through respectable
> blood, sweat and tears, will white people recognise that their blackness is
> not dangerous, uncouth or an attack on white people (LaNegra, 2018).

For the individualized commercial space of influencing, palatable, "girl power"

femininity becomes a viable and effective way of circumventing harmful stereotypes

while competing within a merit-based system that promises equal footing for participants

who must leverage their strengths in exchange for celebrity status (Banet-Weiser, 2018;

Gill & Scharff, 2013). In this way, neoliberal logics and post-feminist discourses offer

Black women the freedom to exist and work as individuals and incentivize their ability to

do so based on their ability to navigate the space while Black.

Other writers critique Black excellence for placing whiteness at its center, but argue that it has become an inherent feature of Black existence regardless. In the pop press piece quoted above, La Negra (2018) states there is nothing "Black" about Black excellence; it is a tool which reifies post-racial discourses about Black achievement and visibility. The article cautions that being the "first Black" person to achieve something or being the only Black person in a room is not a reflection of an individual's particular merits and unique capabilities but is rather a reflection of the deeply ingrained systemic issues which keep Black professional and academic practitioners at arms-length while neatly folding them into the existent system. La Negra (2018) ends by stating that Black excellence is inherent by virtue of the "supherhuman feat" of Black people surviving in their material conditions. Like George the Poet, this piece utilizes similarly exceptionalist language to praise Black perseverance, a sentiment present in some of the scholarly debate about the extent to which Black identity is inherently political due to the enduring legacy of slavery itself. The extent to which Blackness is intelligible or must be framed through the aftermath of slavery provides a point of departure for understanding whether Blackness has a home outside of its politicization from external forces (Brock, 2020; Mills, 1998).

The criticism of Black excellence rightly names the ways in which it is a product of a racist history and mentality, but there are other ways of conceptualizing what it means to succeed as a Black person that do not frame that access within the context of white systems, work, and life. In an article for *Medium*, Williams (2020) critiques the idea of Black excellence as a standard which has "whiteness at its axis," arguing that

"black capitalism and entrepreneurship" are not "cure-alls or the baseline" for what Black

excellence could and should look like. In the wake of the George Floyd protests in

summer 2020, Williams (2020) notes media companies highlighting Black success stories

and white influencers spotlighting Black content creators as well-meaning but ineffective

methods of addressing racism. Rather than drawing attention the systemic issues making

it difficult for Black individuals to succeed no matter the career they pursue, performative

activism and focusing on success stories distracts from the material reality of racial

hardship by reinforcing the message that Black success is still possible *even* in the face of

racial strife.

Like Underwood (2019) and Fapuro (2020), Williams (2020) argues that Black

excellence is only intelligible through whiteness, and the expectation that anyone, even

Black people, can succeed in traditionally exclusive fields is "dehumanizing in itself."

Williams (2020) asserts Black identity should be understood on its own terms,

somewhere between the lawyers, doctors, and celebrities in Black excellence rhetoric and

the thugs, sex workers, and drug abusers as the implicit alternative in the dichotomy of

Black exceptionalism. This argument challenges an understanding of Blackness in

relationship to whiteness, arguing instead to develop an understanding of Black

communities' unique culture, practices, and self-created expectations as a measure by

which Black excellence is defined (Brock, 2020; Mills, 1998).

The term "Black excellence" might be inherently problematic, but some writers

argue that it does not need to be cast to the side; rather, the phrase and its value needs to

be re-negotiated by Black communities themselves. Writing for UK-based independent

news organization Bristol Cable, Chanté Joseph (2018) argues that Black excellence is defined largely by "gaining white approval," or by "celebrat[ing] [Black] people who have achieved in historically racist institutions or white dominated sectors." Black excellence thus breeds competition within Black communities as individuals vie for limited positions in the system. Joseph (2018) is not the first to state that Black communities should focus on producing their own metrics for gaging success and excellence but provides specific examples of what that looks like in practice: The BET Awards and the Black Girls Rock awards show are two events that illustrate Williams (2020) and Joseph's (2018) version of re-negotiated Black excellence. Both Williams (2020) and Joseph's (2018) arguments hinge on the notion that there is no 'win' for Black people in a system that was built to subjugate them. Moreover, Joseph (2018) posits white mediocrity as the societal norm, criticizing the hypocrisy of holding Black communities to standards rarely met by white professionals. Thus, Black communities should – and have – created alternative measures for valuing their success in ways that do not aspire to white double-standards.

Black Excellence on #BlackTumblr

Although the media discourse about Black influencing privileges a particular narrative about Black existence and success, in the same way that Black Twitter allows users to engage and express their culture on their own terms, Black Tumblr (also used as the tag #BlackTumblr) provides a home for conversations about Black excellence and Black histories, many of which center Black women. Several Tumblr accounts are dedicated to sharing Black histories in relationship to historical 'firsts' and political,

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activist education as a combination of text posts and visuals. From analyzing Black

women's thoughts about the Equal Rights Amendment to spotlighting Black intellectual

and feminist figures such as Patricia Hill Collins, these Tumblr blogs engage Black

feminism and critical theory throughout the decades and include a wealth of citations and

links for users to peruse. In my analysis of Tumblr accounts, one of the most popular

posts on the blog "Black Feminism" grapples with the "politics of [black] respectability"

and earlier versions of black excellence rhetoric, examining what it means to have been

Black in the past (tierraharvey, 2013).

Regarding Black excellence, there is a considerable focus on Black 'firsts' though

not all of them focus solely on academia or politics. For instance, one blog has a lengthy

post detailing the life of Rufus Estes, the first Black person to publish a cookbook

(ithedondon20). Taken with the tag line in the bio, the focus on #black excellence

suggests that groundbreaking Black achievements service the larger Black Community as

a whole, creating a collective narrative around what it means to succeed as Black People.

Although the sheer concept of Black excellence is totalizing, the post highlighting Rufus

Estes more appropriately speaks to Joseph's (2018) argument that Black people find

alternative ways of defining Black excellence. By focusing on a Black chef and painting

a more holistic, grounded picture of his life and hobbies, the post in question works to

demystify the seemingly transcendent and near-impossible feat of finding success as a

Black person. Rather than framing Estes as an inherently enterprising individual who

stopped at nothing to achieve that success, the post instead highlights his more mundane

and deeply personal attributes, namely his love for cooking and experimenting with new dishes, who found success is doing what he loved.

Alternative understandings of Black excellence populate #BlackTumblr alongside more traditional conceptualizations rooted in Black exceptionalism, but the re-configuration of how we understand Black history and peoples does not end with the demystification of the term. One of the posts I analyzed contains a 3-minute video from The Root which pulls "the historical receipts" to demonstrate how Black peoples have fundamentally shaped America's cultural and historical landscape (globalriseofblackpeople, 2018). Some of the corresponding comments indicate that white Americans and Europeans alike cannot understand themselves apart from slavery's legacy, an interesting inversion of scholarly debates regarding the extent to which Black peoples (should) understand themselves in relationship to whiteness.

The logic of Black excellence which "has whiteness at its axis," again highlights Brock (2020) and Mills' (1998) arguments about Blackness being made intelligible outside of whiteness (Williams, 2020). Within the context of the aforementioned post, it is not simply a matter of whether or not whiteness should be used to understand Black identity; rather, it is possible to upset this binary understanding of presence and absences by instead inverting systems of definition altogether. The message that white people cannot understand themselves apart from slavery's legacy is further reflected in other posts that list Black contributions to global culture, pointing to Africa as the true birthplace of civilization and Black women being the forebearers of all peoples (globalriseofblackpeople, 2018). In this way, #BlackTumblr has helped give rise to

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alternative definitions of Black excellence and the politicization of Black identity, imagining other pasts, other presents, and other futures made possible for Black persons worldwide.

<center>#BlackGirlMagic and Black Women Who Hustle</center>

Providing a space where critical discussions about Black feminism and Black histories can flourish, Tumblr reveals how Black communities engage and understand how race, gender, and class are articulated together. In particular, the platform's racial affordances invite specific expressions of Black womanhood alongside a 'hustle and grind' mentality which allows Black women to carve space for themselves in traditionally white spaces and commercial spheres. The Black communities, Black-authored posts, and Blac-run accounts create an image of Black women and femininity that is simultaneously sexualized and financially empowered, adopting neoliberal logics that prioritize competitive entrepreneurship in ways that afford Black women a beautiful and lucrative existence.

The hashtag #BlackGirlMagic has been in circulation for years and was first coined online as a way to praise Black women's inherent worth, beauty, and achievements (Long, 2021). Like Black excellence, #BlackGirlMagic exists as a form of Black digital practice whereby Black users collectively shape uniquely raced and gendered subjectivities about Black womanhood. Operating as a gendered form of Black excellence, the hashtag can best be described as a "Blacktag," similar to those used on Black Twitter to indicate a particular feeling, shared experience, or exert cultural competence (Brock, 2012; Sharma, 2013). Concerning Black women and influencers, the

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phrase and hashtag #BlackGirlMagic appears in the media discourse, Tumblr discourse, and influencer content as an explicit point of discussion or as a Blacktag used to help circulate that content online. The tag's iteration on Tumblr is especially interesting as it is often used to tag content featuring images of Black women and influencers, yet those images are incredibly sexualized.

For instance, one Tumblr post features two side-by-side snapshots from one of Jackie Aina's photo shoots (https://justcallhermo.tumblr.com/post/174927498214/jackie-aina). The influencer is wearing a blue and brown tribal-patterned bikini-esque outfit, partially obscured by palm tree leaves and climbing ivy. Thick, gold collars adorn her neck, and she has a blue and gold head scarf to match. These African-inspired aesthetics are reaffirmed by the rustic background featuring raw wood walls and bright blue paint. Some of the tags include #black tumblr, #blackgirlmagic, and #blackout (a tag that is often used to spotlight Black content creators). The latter two tags position the Black feminine body as a site of pride and empowerment meant to celebrate Black femininity. Aina's dark makeup, tribal aesthetics, tropical background, and scant outfit create a seductive depiction of Black femininity. Indeed, both images hail a sexualized African subject denoting normative femininity. The post has over 10,000 notes and many of the comments are comprised of short affirmations praising the influencer and her body. Several comments refer to her as "Auntie" or "Auntie Jackie," an affectionate and endearing term regularly used to describe women in Black communities. Some users describe her as a "warrior goddess" or "Venus" or "queen," evoking a colloquial sense of reverence for the influencer and this particular shoot (justcallhermo, 2018).

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The overt sexualization of the #BlackGirlMagic tag operates as a post-feminist sentiment where Black women leverage their beauty, bodies, and "erotic capital" to empower themselves (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 112). Although exercising bodily autonomy through personal choice and sexual freedom is compatible with neoliberal logics which encourage women (as ideal neoliberal subjects) to participate in the market through aspirational labor, Black women ultimately play into longstanding racialized stereotypes by the same logic. The incredibly sexualized portrayals of Black femininity on Tumblr echo the jezebel stereotype, positioning Black women as exotic, sexualized, and dangerous Others even as the tag exists for Black women to recognize one another's inherent worth and beauty. Here, the Black feminine body remains fetishized as prevailing narratives about Black female sexuality shape community-based expressions of Black feminine identity.

The media discourse uses #BlackGirlMagic to represent a gendered form of Black excellence, yet the Tumblr discourse prioritizes overtly sexualized images of Black women with the same tag. As a means of uplifting Black women, recognizing their inherent worth and beauty, and recognizing their respective accomplishments, the explicit focus on Black women's bodies makes them particularly idealized neoliberal and racialized subjects to become influencers. Rather than limiting Black excellence to scientists and doctors, Black women can attain similar status through influencing which affords them to pursue a wide variety of hobbies, careers, and talents, be it beauty vlogging, running a cooking channel on YouTube, or becoming a lifestyle Instagrammer. The very basis of #BlackGirlMagic portrays Black women as capable and beautiful

individuals while explicitly hailing gender to carve space for Black women in places and conversations where they have traditionally been excluded.

The #BlackGirlMagic tag is not the only way race and gender are articulated together to shape understandings about Black women's potential for success and happiness. Writing for AfroTech, a site which describes itself as a "premier tech, investing, and wealth-building platform for the Black community, Njera Perkins (2020) spotlights Black women who have leveraged digital platforms to build their personal brand and find success in marketing spheres and influencing work (https://afrotech.com/). The narrative surrounding these "self-made trailblazers" in Perkins' (2020) article draws on American bootstrap rhetoric, mapping how each woman struck out and created opportunities for themselves instead of waiting for gigs and partnerships to come along. Perkins (2020) articulates a slightly different version of a few influencers' personal brand and mission than what appears on each woman's home accounts, playing up their entrepreneurial spirit. The neoliberal logics which paint Black influencers as successful, self-made entrepreneurs erases the real, material sacrifices and emotional exhaustion necessary to achieve that success, dimensions explicitly addressed in the Black influencers' content. Under the mantle of #BlackGirlMagic, Black influencers are lauded for their success and specifically for succeeding as Black women.

Although the #BlackGirlMagic tag is heavily sexualized on Tumblr, the same tag is used to highlight news, activism, and racial politics, at times appearing on the same account or in the same post. One blog combines political content with overtly sexualized images of Black women. The bio description simply reads: "Universal Black Love" and

implicitly uses Black Girl Magic rhetoric to frame the blog's mission

(blackbrownuniverse). The blog is incredibly popular, consistently garnering tens of

thousands of notes per post. Many such posts include screenshots taken from Twitter that

explicitly address colonial histories, the Black Lives Matter movement, or voting rights in

the United States.

The cover photo of a similar blog reads: "Arrest the cops who killed Breona [sic]

Taylor," and some of the content spotlights current political events and movements such

as BLM and Stop Asian Hate, inviting users to discuss in the comments

(blackgirlsreverything) . Many of the posts on this account humanize and diversify

representations of Black men and women (e.g. showing a Black lesbian couple on their

wedding day and showing Tupac holding a little girl). Although some of this content

works to shift narratives about Black stereotypes, a significant portion of the posts

contain highly sexualized images of Black women ranging from influencers, user

submissions, and other Black women active in digital spaces. This user formerly ran a

blog titled "Black Girls R Pretty 2" which largely contained similar imagery of Black

women; blackgirlsreverything includes a higher volume of political content alongside

appreciation posts that frequently utilize the #BlackGirlMagic tag. In this way, the blog

attempts to initiate conversations about Black issues while simultaneously sexualizing the

Black feminine body through the rhetoric of Black Girl Magic in its somewhat limited

portrayals of Black femininity. Here, Black women are positioned as objects of desire

whose outward sexualization is meant to demonstrate bodily autonomy and "excellence."

More interestingly, accounts that use #BlackGirlMagic to laud Black influencers for their beauty and successes demonstrate an individualizing logic which positions the Black body at its center. The screenshots in such posts often adopt neoliberal logics to articulate their points; one screenshot includes a Twitter user indicating that Black women who "hustle" and "grind" should look for a man with "vision" (i.e. entrepreneurial spirit in the context of the tweet) to fully actualize their capital potential and reads "love isn't enough when u want to break generational curses" (blackbrownuniverse). The logic being laid bare here is that Black women should capitalize on their own motivations and drive to attract an appropriate and similarly minded partner (men, specifically). Here, neoliberal logics about aspiration and success are interwoven with cultural notions of love and desirability, playing into the increasingly popular existence of 'power couples' defined by their mutually enterprising pursuits. In this way, neoliberal logics about labor and love provide the means by which Black women and influencers achieve self-actualization.

Similarly, one incredibly popular blog explicitly targeted toward Black women adopts both the Black Girl Magic and self-love rhetoric in much of its content. What is particularly interesting is the extent to which the blog hails a neoliberal racialized subject using self-improvement discourses, "grind" culture, and aspirational sentiments to do so (blackfemininity). The version of Black femininity depicted in these posts is both limited and rooted in sexualized stereotypes. Indeed, several posts on this account contained comments where users argued to see versions of Black womanhood and influencers working outside of makeup and beauty industries. The blog's pinned post reads, in part:

I want more black women to have an **abundance** mindset. A **growth** mindset. A **wealth** mindset. I want us to be on a path of continuous self-improvement— always getting better [...] I want us to think higher and bigger (blackfemininity).

Coupled with a number of posts depicting Black women in sexualized ways, the 'achieve your dreams' mentality works to pin Black femininity to entrepreneurial subjectivities which imagine the Black feminine body as both a capital tool and object of desire.

The very usage of terms "hustle" and "grind" which populate many of the posts about Black women's historical successes and those about Black influencers rely on familiar Black linguistic and cultural terms to reinforce the notion that Black women should be continually striving for material success. Indeed, this verbiage also makes an appearance in Black influencer content by way of Instagram posts and YouTube videos. Hustle and grind have become familiar rhetoric for all influencers and are appropriated by digital audiences in general, but for Black influencers the terms provide an air of credibility and familiarity with Black culture which, in part, validates their own connection to Black communities.

The neoliberal logics which encourage individuals to hustle until they finally achieve the success to which they aspire are particularly evident in Black influencer's content. Black beauty vlogger Jackie Aina, who has amassed over three and a half million subscribers on YouTube, frequently adopts such rhetoric in her content. One of her most viewed videos is a product review for Florence by Mills, a skin care line developed by the teenage actress Millie Bobbie Brown. In the video, Aina expresses her love for Millie Bobbie Brown – and *Stranger Things* and *Game of Thrones* – and praises Brown's

ambition for launching a clean makeup line known as Florence by Mills. Aina lauds the combination of cosmetic and skin care products available in the line. Throughout the video, she compares Florence to other brands such as CoverGirl for price comparison, noting that Florence skews more expensive, particularly for the presumed target audience of young teen girls. Aina admits she is impressed that Brown has become a business "mogul" at such a young age – describing it as "goals" – and hopes to see more of it from the younger generations in the future (Aina, 2019).

Brown has been a frequent topic of discussion in press coverage and conversations on social media about the way she is aged up through makeup and clothing in ways that sexualize her appearance. The idea that a 15-year-old girl should be breaking into an industry and garnering success fits very much within the hustle and grind culture popularized by influencing and other modes of digital labor, especially for young girls who are increasingly encouraged to age themselves up. Indeed, Aina's comments about Brown reflect the increasingly gendered nature of promotional work and our willingness to praise children for capitalizing on their entrepreneurial spirit early. Towards that end, beauty influencers play a critical role in how girls and young women view themselves and are taught to replicate sexualized versions of femininity made readily available online.

Similarly praising entrepreneurial prowess, BET Networks created a YouTube video spotlighting several Black influencers as they recount their respective paths to influencing stardom. In each creator's narrative about how they broke into influencing stardom, one influencer describes how they began uploading videos for personal reasons

and qualified for YouTube's monetization program. Being relatable in both content and interactions with followers are mentioned as pivotal to growing one's brand and making it as an influencer. This idea is reinforced throughout the video as the interviewees spend time breaking down how they're "just regular people who got blessed [and] lucky," partially obscuring the intense labor and long hours some of them have dedicated to building their brand and platform (BET Networks, 2018). Further, each influencer is presented as an inherently enterprising individual evidenced in their discussions of what they do or have done outside of YouTube; one influencer currently works a full-time job in digital production and stresses how she loves it too much to sacrifice it while another says she started her own business during a break from the platform. Coupled with their insistence that anyone can make it using an iPhone and managing their time wisely, the neoliberal logics that undergird venture labor are presented as natural and easily attainable.

Neoliberal Governmentality and Racialized, Gendered Competition

The system of rewards for capitalizing on an entrepreneurial spirit and achieving material success structure individualized modes of digital labor: Influencers can gain celebrity status, garner financial success, and live out their wildest dreams. The result, however, is largely dependent upon the time, resources, energy, and unique traits individuals are willing to invest and exploit toward this particular brand of success. Neoliberal logics tell individuals that the rewards outweigh the numerous upfront costs and eventual risks, but promise lucrative work, fame, and comfort to those enterprising

few. In order to succeed within the market and as an influencer, one must also be willing to compete and persevere.

Because capitalism is predicated on an unregulated market which prioritizes competition by way of innovation, Black participants must compete with one another to achieve individual success. In the Bristol Cable article, Joseph (2018) describes the chaos of competition between Black actors, noting "the competition for the minimal representation we do have, say on boards, front benches and in the media, risks creating a 'crabs in a bucket' effect—where we clamour over one another to get there." The narrative of Black excellence thus breeds competition within Black communities as individuals vie for limited positions in the system (Joseph, 2018). For Black women, competition becomes an acceptable and necessary way of actualizing and legitimizing one's career and personal identity (Joseph, 2018). Neoliberalism works quite well in propping up post-feminist discourses about women's relationship to work which, in turn, justifies the existence of competition between women. Framed as an inevitable part of the hustle in which women are judged and rewarded based on their individual merits, bodily autonomy and individual choice are the primary indicators of a woman's material circumstances and work prospects under neoliberal capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2004). A Black woman who can exercise her bodily autonomy, or "erotic capital" as an Instagram model, for example, is posited not as competition for thousands of others vying to make it on the platform, but as a successful, enterprising individual whose circumstances represent #BlackGirlMagic and Black excellence (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 112).

Similarly, post-racial sentiments work with neoliberal logics to erase racial differences among market participants. Neoliberalism is inherently colorblind, allowing anyone of any creed and any color a chance to compete for self-made for celebrity status. Only personal merits and diligence determine who does and who does not succeed. While neoliberalism may recognize the success of an individual Black person insofar as it is another example of a healthy market working fairly, Black excellence indicates that the individual in question has not only positively represented themselves, but Black communities as well. Thus, true individuality is not afforded to the individuals in Black success stories; rather, Black communities are simultaneously hailed when Black stories are highlighted.

Post-feminist and post-racial discourses reveal how neoliberal logics work to mask race and gender-based struggles and systemic-isms that continue to subjugate individuals, but even the notion of a merit-based system is a lie. Joseph (2018) notes that "white mediocrity is rife at the top of our society" in spheres of work, thus upsetting the notion that an individual's unique capabilities and merits are the primary arbiter of their station. One of my interviewees, Liz, echoed a similar sentiment, noting how white influencers are permitted to submit mediocre work while Black creators are expected to produce higher quality content:

> I also think that [Black influencers] are held to a higher standard […] If I'm on a campaign with, say, a white blogger and I think that my content is expected to be a higher quality than theirs, and if you go back and look at campaigns that we've done a lot of the times the white influencers will submit sub-par content, sub-par tags, and it's okay for them to do that, but for us we're held at a higher standard and then we're not picked for as many campaigns (Liz, interview, 2022).

While Black people are forced to compete with one another for limited positions, working tirelessly to bolster their qualifications or produce higher quality work, white individuals are more easily able to secure similar or the same positions without the necessary experience (Joseph, 2018; Underwood, 2019). This speaks to the mantra that Black people often have to "work twice as hard" for half as much, a reality overtly ignored and obscured by neoliberal logics that insist individual choices and achievements are the ultimate maker of our circumstances (La Negra, 2018).

Succeeding in venture labor through hard work and a dedicated commitment to do so is a normative starting point for entrepreneurs, but Black women who are engaged in individualized, precarious work challenge the idea that market participants start on equal footing. In one of the video interviews I analyzed as part of the media discourse about Black influencing, Refinery29 hosted a roundtable conversation with five women entrepreneurs and influencers, two of whom are Black (Refinery29, 2017). The interviewer asks the women to discuss how they differentiated themselves in their respective fields and what inspired them to break the mold. The narrative being shaped throughout the interview presents each woman as a dynamic problem-solver who now works to bolster confidence among young, entrepreneurial women. Being transparent about salaries to initiate conversations about pay disparities is categorized as "cocktail talk" (Refinery29, 2017). Two of the white interviewees state that aspiring female entrepreneurs should "forget that you're a woman" to ease their transition to self-made professionals, but one of the Black women quickly and explicitly disagrees with the statement on the grounds that we need to acknowledge how unique, intersecting identities

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will fundamentally change your experience in the field (Refinery29, 2017). In much of the video, feminized language is used to contextualize the experiences of assertive professionals working in fields of beauty, finance, and technology.

Similarly, my interviewee Sabine dispels myths associated with individualized, neoliberal labor by reflecting on her own experiences as a Black woman. She explains some of the lessons she has learned over the year, noting that if she is attending "a live event or an event where I'm going to be talent" as part of a brand deal, she "learned very quickly that there probably won't be hair and makeup for me" (Sabine, interview, 2022). In addition to considering how brands' failure to consider her skin tone or hair texture when securing beauty artists has placed her in several awkward positions, Sabine also challenges the idea that the act of securing a brand deal automatically produces financial security:

> I think that's the biggest thing people don't realize when you get into working with brands and traveling and doing events and stuff like that. You have to have money to make money […] I've had people spell my name wrong and when I get to the hotel, they don't have a room for me, so I have to pay for a room out of pocket (Sabine, interview, 2022).

Sabine's experiences demonstrate how the mythical and luxurious portrait of influencing work simply does not hold true for Black creators. Between the lack of resources and opportunities for Black creators and brands' ignorance about what hiring Black talent might entail (i.e. finding suitable hair and makeup artists or ensuring that their name is spelled correctly), Black influencers are subject to additional roadblocks which they must often sort out themselves – Sabine now does her own hair and makeup for live appearances – in comparison to their white counterparts.

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Although racialized neoliberal subjectivities are widespread and both neoliberal logics and post-feminist discourses appeal to Black women looking to improve their station within an overtly racist capitalist system, traditional definitions of influencing are not entirely adequate to describe what Black content creators are doing, Black influencers do not always secure brand deals, and at the very least, secure fewer and for less pay than their white counterparts (Carman, 2020; Deighton, 2020; Katsha, 2020). Yet, the work Black women are doing online is still recognizably influencer-esque in nature; they curate specialized content for their following, develop their digital personae, and perform stylized aspects of identity, work, and consumption in ways that afford them authenticity. Some Black influencers are also not considered to possess classically 'likeable' characteristics or personality, evidenced in the way white audiences criticize how Black influencers communicate about race even as they seek out Black influencers to educate them. Because Black influencers navigate familiar stereotypes about the way Black women look and how they speak, the cheery, palatable, and likeable traits traditionally associated with successful influencers does not apply in the same way.

Conclusion

The standards to which Black influencers are held and evaluated are defined by white standards of success and beauty. Because Black influencers are preeminent representations of Black excellence, their success is not simply defined by their ability to succeed in curating a personal brand, garnering a large following, or generating revenue from their work. Rather, Black influencers' success is also determined based on their ability to replicate white versions of conventional influencing work such as travel

blogging, beauty vlogging, and Instagram modeling. Working in the commercial and gendered space of influencing, Black women are encouraged to leverage their #BlackGirlMagic through appealing, often sexualized, visual imagery and must compete with one another to secure "just a small piece of the pie" (Campbell, 2020). In so doing, Black influencers sometimes play into longstanding stereotypes about Black femininity and sexuality.

Racialized neoliberal subjectivities invite Black actors to partake in precarious venture labor that offers few protections. As a gendered form of Black excellence, #BlackGirlMagic is a particularly useful phrase that encourages Black women to commodify themselves through individual empowerment. By forcing Black influencers to compete with one another for the limited brand partnerships available to them, neoliberal logics about individual success evidenced in racial idioms such as Black excellence distract consumers, digital users, audiences, and other influencers from the systemic issues that necessarily shape the experiences of Black influencers. Encouraging Black influencers to adopt American bootstrap rhetoric to achieve their goals, dreams, and passions and potentially find a way out of generational poverty masks slavery's legacy and systemic racism that renders Black identity consumable and profitable in the first place.

Because Black influencers pose a threat to the neoliberal capitalist system, brands and media companies shift tensions away from the systemic issues still plaguing Black creators online and toward short-term economic solutions (e.g. beauty companies expanding their product lines to include darker shades of foundation). In this way, Black

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identity is robbed of its political valence as brands, media companies, and professional

actors attempt to subjugate potential resistance by extracting cultural and economic

capital from underpaid Black creators while falsely promising that the flexibility afforded

by venture labor cares little for their racial, gender, or class identities. That said, Black

influencers recognize the position in which they have been placed as the material realities

of systemic racism and sexism are uniquely and deeply felt. Although brands and

institutions work to rid Black identity of its potential to upset the system, Black

influencers are finding ways to carve space for themselves despite these systemic

vulnerabilities.

CHAPTER 8

ANALYSIS:

THE (DE)POLITICIZATION OF BLACK IDENTITY

> The Black community needs change. They deserve change. And they
> deserve an end to over 450 years of trying to survive within a system that
> was not created for them. We need to burn the old system to the ground
> and rebuild — and that's going to take more than a month of protesting
> and an overhaul of well-intentioned social media posts (Dreamers &
> Doers, 2020).

This quote taken from a *Business Insider* article about how best to support Black

communities highlights the crux of the issues regarding racial justice, systemic change,

and solidarity in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests. Under a competitive

neoliberal meritocracy, participants are told that their identity-based differences (e.g.

race, ethnicity, class, gender) have little bearing on their potential or ability to succeed

within such a system; rather, success is determined by one's ability to leverage their

unique talents and their dedication to pursuing their passions. For Black influencers,

however, their bodies remain marked. Black influencers navigate a competitive

commercial terrain where systemic issues are replicated on digital platforms. Because

neoliberalism recognizes difference insofar as it is both a tangible source of brand value

and proof that the system works, arbiters of the system (e.g. brands and media

companies) find ways to acknowledge Blackness and racial justice that do little to upset

the system itself. By regulating what it means to be a Black influencer and shifting

attention away from systemic issues and toward economic solutions to racial strife,

brands and media companies retain what is most valuable about a Black subject: Their

ability to generate revenue and reinvigorate the market. And yet, Black communities are

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taking up digital tools and platforms to renegotiate Black identity on their own terms, collectively challenging what it means to be Black in America.

<div align="center">Marking Black Influencers and Regulating Blackness</div>

Black influencers are already marked as distinct from their white counterparts. It's in the name. As African writer and journalist Meri Nana-Ama Danquah (2011) argues, Black modifiers are plentiful: non-Black speakers often qualify who they mean with phrases such as 'that Black girl,' 'my Black friend,' 'a Black student.' The phrase 'Black influencers' functions in the same way, making this group of people distinct from unnamed (white) influencers. In this sense, Blackness is made to mean in implicitly white spaces. Black influencers do not exist solely as influencers but as references to a particular subset of digital laborers, evidenced in the myriad listicles which name and group together Black influencers. Not only does the phrasing of Black influencers name Blackness as a distinct and acceptable form of categorization, but it also suggests that these influencers have something in common by virtue of their Blackness. In grouping these influencers together based on their perceived racial similarities and through what is assumed to be political content (i.e. content about race), media discourse presents Black influencers as unified through their Blackness rather than separated by genre, niche, or interests. Individuality is afforded to 'regular' (white) influencers. What makes the distinction legible is how Black influencers' work and bodies differ from conventional, unnamed white influencers.

The tensions regarding the extent to which Blackness is inherently political as discussed by Brock (2020), Danquah (2011), and Mills (1998) is clearly evidenced in the

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attention Black influencers received in 2020. As described by several influencers quoted in the media discourse and those I interviewed, Black influencers received an influx of white followers following increased press and media coverage at the behest of digital media companies encouraging white audiences and consumers to support the Black community by following Black influencers. Expecting to be educated, white users were confused, surprised, and annoyed when Black content creators chose not to speak about George Floyd or did not produce more content about BLM in the ensuing months (Sky, interview, 2021; McNeal, 2020). The reactions from white followers speaks to the assumption that Black people are comfortable speaking about race by virtue of their racial identity. Audiences see their marked bodies and automatically assume a willingness to engage in racial justice or conversations about Black tragedy. In Mills' (1998) words, Black influencers have had to look for ways to assert that their racial identity was "not [their] shape" regardless of the fact that brands and media companies attempted to label them anyway (p. xiv).

The pressure Black influencers face to grapple with race is also exemplary of the scholarly debate about how Blackness is made to mean in relationship to whiteness, Black excellence being one illustrative example. For white audiences and digital media companies, the fact that Black influencers cohere as a group is rooted in a racist history of refusing individuality and difference to Black populations (Cheers, 2017; Fapuro, 2020; hooks, 1992; Spillers, 1987). This is further evidenced in the language used to describe Black people and influencers in the media discourse, by referring to The Black Community as a singular monolith rather than acknowledging the wide variety of

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disparate people, opinions, and experiences that shape diverse Black populations. Following Black influencers and buying from Black-owned businesses then becomes a way to support all Black people via The Black Community, obscuring regional and individual needs.

While the media discourse privileges a narrow and singular version of Blackness among influencers, digital users parse the lines differently. As a platform well-suited for longform communication and critical discourse and education, Tumblr's racial affordances invite users to perform, analyze, and collectively engage race in a relatively anonymous way. One Tumblr post contains a short video with a Black man saying "ooh wee, look what that money make a bitch do" followed with the line "Me every time I see these Black celebrities and IG influencers be COONS on social media" (netflixandnudez). The post has 2,480 notes and has 20 comments, all of which exist as some form of affirmation. One user asserts that "every time there is a BLM movement going on, black celebs always show their true colors" and another tellingly remarks "class solidarity over race solidarity" (netflixandnudez). This is one of the only posts on the list which explicitly grapples with class differences within Black communities in ways that draw boundaries around the extent to which a Black influencer may 'truly' represent Black communities. As a criterion for gaging a Black influencer's authenticity, this comment implies that Black influencers are too far removed from Black communities or realities by virtue of having garnered material and financial success. These influencers are treated as sellouts who no longer bear the brunt of systemic racism by having succeeded in an individualistic neoliberal market.

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Resentment colors a considerable portion of the commentary about influencers on Tumblr, particularly Black ones, yet such an assumption similarly homogenizes Black communities and experiences. As digital users criticize influencers for their celebrity, performative line of work, or being perceived as shallow, Black influencers are similarly described as being too distant from racial tensions felt in Black communities. But in distilling Black identity and experience to having experienced continual racial strife, these users are painting a limited, narrow-minded view of what it means to be Black. Because influencers are presumed to be out of touch with their Blackness by virtue of their success, users regulate the extent to which one can be considered Black (i.e. the extent to which they are still subject to racial hardship). As such, the underlying assumption is that financial success allows Black people to either buy their way out of racial hardship or serves as an indicator that they are no longer affected by the same systemic issues.

Another Tumblr post includes screenshots taken from musical artist Halsey's Twitter in which she criticizes celebrities for not using their platform to address racial injustice or amplify Black voices following George Floyd's murder. The Tumblr user who shared the images adds:

> Halsey hits at something that's bothered me for years. Celebrities aside, this whole social media 'influencer' movement is superficial crap. None of them speak to meaningful issues. You want to influence? Teach people about racial or climate injustice, wealth inequality, bigotry, or health care. Literally anything substantive. I don't want your lululemon shorts or your shitty face wash. F*ck off with your capitalist ass (politijohn, 2021).

The post has 4,911 notes and many of the comments express similar frustration and disappointment. The resentment evident in the comment above speaks to the

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perceived disingenuousness of influencing: that by working in a fundamentally

commercial context where the goal is to secure brand partnerships to sell to digital

audiences in more targeted, effective ways, influencers ultimately betray a potentially

more critical, relevant, and noble form of utilizing their influence. In other words, the

comment reflects a prevalent criticism that influencers ought to be using their platforms

for good instead of exploiting them to secure consumers for their brand partners. One

user, however, had this to say:

> For black influencers I don't feel the same. We suffer from PTSD as it is
> and if you as a black person aren't doing OK at this time then you don't
> have to speak out about anything you don't want to. Some of us are
> drained, depressed and filled with anxiety. Some of us need to rest
> (politijohn, 2021).

The general sentiment evident in this post echoes the skepticism associated with

influencers, be they white or Black, present in the other threads I have outlined. Although

the "class solidarity over race solidarity" comment is critical of Black influencers,

specifically, this one similarly exposes and interrogates the frustration with public figures

being beholden to capitalist ends at the expense of Black communities (politijohn, 2021).

Moreover, it acknowledges how speaking about racial justice can be uniquely exhausting

to Black influencers who might just need a break from the media coverage and

conversations replaying George Floyd's murder. Based on the reference to Black

communities' lived anxieties and exhaustion, the PTSD the Tumblr user refers to

encapsulates the inherited generational trauma many Black Americans are forced to hold

and manage (Hartman, 1997). Hypervisibility further compounds those anxieties as Black

influencers are expected to push or work through their inherited trauma online for all to

see, compounded by the watershed moment of the George Floyd protests which have left some creators guilt-ridden over their success amid such grim circumstances (McNeal, 2020; Wooden, 2020). Being expected by brands to lean into their racial identity as digital users criticize their inability or perceived refusal to speak out about race, Black influencers are left with the impossible task of masking or outright ignoring their trauma and mental health in order to 'do the right thing.'

<div align="center">Systemic Distraction and Failures</div>

As part of the response to the George Floyd protests and the subsequent demonstrations, brands and digital media companies were quick to offer their own solutions to the civil disruption. Listicles and press pieces encouraging people to follow Black influencers and buy from Black businesses became ubiquitous among the slew of news articles conveying updates about the protests and "riots." BuzzFeed and Refinery29 produced listicles spotlighting Black content creators of varying genres in an effort to secure new followers on their behalf. Uber Eats waived all delivery fees for Black-owned restaurants for the remainder of the 2020 calendar year to boost virtual traffic to Black-owned eateries across the nation. Other companies publicly disclosed their donations to antiracist organizations.

The media response to the George Floyd protests reveals how brands and media outlets prioritize economic solutions to racial strife in ways that posed little threat to their own capitalist ventures yet demanded authentic and thoughtful forms of engagement from Black influencers. Many of the popular press pieces use the protests as a point of departure before awkwardly pivoting to indicate what brands are doing to offer support.

For instance, one *Forbes* article begins: "Amid protests to end police brutality against African Americans Uber Eats has found a way to support Black businesses" with waived delivery fees for Black-owned restaurants (Hale, 2020). Hale (2020) explains how Uber Eats enjoyed immense profits and increased shares amid the pandemic and, in turn, is giving back to Black communities with discounted Uber rides to Black-owned businesses to supplement its support through Uber Eats. The article is incredibly short and spends more time detailing Uber's dicey history with employing drivers of color than what the company is doing to support minority communities.

To demonstrate that they are also 'walking the walk,' Uber's CEO states that "[w]e are committed to supporting the black community" (Hale, 2020). Delish writer Morillo (2020) similarly paints a clearer picture of what Uber is doing to support Black communities. In addition to highlighting Uber Eats' in-app feature to search Black restaurants more easily and the company's decision to waive delivery fees for the duration of 2020, Morillo (2020) acknowledges the company's $1 million donation to the Equal Justice Initiative and the Center for Policing Equity. Driving consumers to Uber Eats with the promise of discounted rates for Black-owned businesses, however, does little to address the immediate structural issues at play in George Floyd's murder. Where brands presented their own products and services as venues through which to support Black communities (i.e. through consumption), Black influencers were "drowning in messages" from "hundreds or even thousands of strangers wanting [their] perspective" (McNeal, 2020). In this way, Black creators were pressured to engage this watershed moment with authenticity and authority by virtue of their racial identity while brands'

impulse was to commercialize and exploit Black consumers, communities, and influencers in the aftermath.

Other articles focus instead on strategies for supporting Black communities that companies can adopt apart from one-time donations. The Deputy Editor for the magazine *Entrepreneur* Frances Dodds (2020) beings one article by addressing the George Floyd protests, citing the demonstrations as a catapult for revisiting meaningful discussions about racial inequality. The article presents a fairly comprehensive list of actionable solutions for helping minority-owned businesses, such as writing local representatives to influence legislation and volunteering the resources available at one's workplace to help Black individuals and businesses in the community. Dodds (2020) spotlights Connie Evans, the CEO of Association for Enterprise Opportunity, and her suggestions for funneling income and resources into Black communities. Evans frames entrepreneurs as those best positioned to address systemic issues and maps the ways entrepreneurial leadership can be leveraged to exact change, using her company's initiative Main Street Rise as an exemplary case. Highlighting a Black woman entrepreneur is an important way to integrate Black voices into popular conversations about Black issues, and although Dodds' (2020) article is loaded with useful links and specific examples, the narrative insinuates that entrepreneurs and private companies should be the ones creating and implementing solutions.

In the same vein, one *Chicago Tribune* article explores how Black-owned businesses have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic and provides various ways for readers to support them, such as signing the 15% pledge, buying directly from Black

businesses, engaging Black brands on social media, and encouraging companies to

sponsor and invest in Black entrepreneurs (Gibson; 2020). The slideshow style list offers

little context as to why this matters or how exactly Black businesses are "affected by

discriminatory laws and practices," and the list is overwhelmingly comprised of

individual solutions to much larger problems (Gibson, 2020). Although donating to

organizations that support Black businesses and buying directly from Black businesses

are actionable and, in many ways, effective, the issues plaguing Black communities are

framed as a systemic yet few of the proposed solutions include higher level intervention

apart from mentioning potential investors who might help.

Even articles that focus primarily on what Black business owners have to say

about what their communities need reaffirm the individualizing, post-racial discourses

that continue to subjugate Black people and entrepreneurs. In an article published in

Philadelphia Magazine, the George Floyd protests become a framework within which to

introduce the idea of "vot[ing] with your dollar" to empower Black communities (Paule

& Forman, 2020). The article spotlights other behaviors such as leaving positive reviews

of Black businesses and increasing publicity through digital engagement with the brands,

shops, and owners to help increase their reach. Joy Fowler-Davis, co-owner of a UPS

store in Fishtown, is quoted as saying that when Black customers see "owner" on her

name tag, it encourages them to think "If they can do it, so can I" (Paule & Forman,

2020). Fowler-Davis' words display a short but telling sentiment that plays on American

bootstrap mentality and partially erases the material circumstances that render the

existence of a Black business owner a noteworthy one in the first place. The rest of the

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article lists some Black-owned businesses in Philly where readers can dine, shop, and treat themselves as part of their "post-shutdown self-care," playing up the idea that white audiences can gain emotional comfort from Black businesses that have been disproportionately affected by both the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations (Paule & Forman, 2020).

The extent to which Black businesses are made visible also reveals the unique challenges Black entrepreneurs face against systems that have worked to marginalize them. One Mashable article relies heavily on recent studies and long-term research as well as quotes from Black digital laborers to contextualize how systemic racism affects Black businesses (Haas; 2020). Citing several Black influencers and content creators, the article briefly addresses wage gaps, gentrification, and intersectionality in Black entrepreneurial contexts. Cynthia Gordy Giwa and Tayo of Black-Owned Brooklyn assert that publicity can make or break Black businesses, noting the need for Black creators and entrepreneurs to garner as much attention as is possible (Haas; 2020). As such, visibility becomes a critical measure by which Black businesses may find success. Largely located in Black neighborhoods and featured less frequently in media discourse or press pieces about local businesses, Black businesses sometimes struggle to bring in new clientele who are unfamiliar with their locale or existence (Haas, 2020). Thus, garnering more media attention becomes a tangible and invaluable way to grow one's business.

The Struggle for and Paradox of Visibility

Although greater representation of Black creators is valuable to help sustain them long-term, other Black creators acknowledge the risks associated with outwardly labeling

their work or businesses as Black. Returning to Haas' (2020) piece about supporting

Black businesses, Shami Oshun, a designer working on Twitter and Instagram quoted in

the piece, describes the tensions that surround labeling oneself as a Black business given

the expectations that Black brands are necessarily niche and unable to service wider

markets. Coupled with Gordy Giwa and Tayo's comments about media attention, Oshun

draws attention to how longstanding systemic racism has hindered the success of Black

businesses, one example being the construction of highways in the 1950s which bypassed

Black business districts (Goldberg, 2009; Spence, 2015). As an outgrowth of racist

policies, Black businesses are placed in a position where their visibility has the potential

to increase foot traffic and reaffirm the belief that Black businesses are niche. The article

ends with a discussion of whether recent spikes in support for Black businesses and

content creators (i.e. increases in revenue and social media followers) are temporary or

reflect a more robust, sincere commitment to addressing racial inequities. The answer is,

unfortunately, that much of the push to support Black communities has faded, supported

by my participants' observations that while 2020 was their most fiscally successful year

to date, 2021 resulted in a sharp decrease in partnerships and attention.

Other cultural critics explicitly address the precarity Black creators and

entrepreneurs face particularly within the commercial context of labor. Reflecting on

#BlackOutTueday in her Refinery29 article, Cortne Bonilla (2020) offers a compelling

critique of industry reactions to the racial and civil unrest in summer 2020, criticizing

Instagram's creation of the black square on #BlackOutTuesday to indicate solidarity with

the Black community. As a form of performative activism, not only were Black

influencers and users critical of the less-than-meaningful display, but important information about petitions and demonstrations were more difficult to find because the #BlackLivesMatter tags were clogged with black out posts. Brands and influencers using racialized hashtags typically employed by Black activists and the use of white guilt to fuel support for Black communities thus muddled Black activist tags and conversations online.

Following these criticisms, Bonilla (2020) discusses what real, lasting change should look like while reminding readers that Black content creators and businesses are rarely afforded the same sympathy when they make mistakes. Rooted in Black producers' hypervisibility, the article notes that increased demand for Black-owned products has made it difficult for them to keep up with timely shipping and coordinating sales due to their disproportionate access to funds, facilities, and other infrastructures. While individual consumers leave frustrated reviews online, attention shifts away from the disproportionate access to recourses and materials Black businesses have and toward a more individualizing narrative that a particular business is simply unable to keep up or inadequate at what it does. In this way, Black businesses are framed as failing actors in a merit-based market rather than the vulnerable, systemically affected people and organizations that they are.

Black-run digital media companies and organizations delve more deeply into the systemic factors that leave Black creators at a disadvantage to compete within neoliberal markets. As a platform designed to provide women entrepreneurs with resources, networking opportunities, and public relations insight, Dreamers & Doers (2020)

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spotlights four Black entrepreneurs who detail some best practices for supporting Black communities long-term in a *Business Insider* piece. Two of the Black creators and professionals quoted here explain that Black entrepreneurs have historically had to do more with scarce resources and have been continually dismissed as niche or somehow "less than" white entrepreneurs doing similar work (Dreamers & Doers, 2020). The terms "storytelling" and "narrative" appear frequently in this piece and the article itself is structured in a fluid way, framing each woman's series of statements as an involved conversation with one another. The quotes include personal anecdotes about encounters with racist ignorance and solutions for addressing racial inequality in the United States. Several women cite increased sponsorships for Black venture laborers in finance as a particularly meaningful solution. The article asserts that supporting Black businesses is not about support itself or "handouts," – it should be about doing better business (Dreamers & Doers). Black excellence is alluded to here and used to explain how Black entrepreneurs offer creative and lucrative solutions to industry problems which are often passed over in favor of white venture laborers. The article ends with an insightful quote, encapsulating its core argument about the need for real, systemic change:

> The Black community needs change. They deserve change. And they deserve an end to over 450 years of trying to survive within a system that was not created for them. We need to burn the old system to the ground and rebuild — and that's going to take more than a month of protesting and an overhaul of well-intentioned social media posts (Dreamers & Doers, 2020).

The call for systemic change and acknowledging the inherent racism of a competitive capitalist system outlined in the Dreamers & Doers (2020) piece is matched by other articles which comprised the media discourse about how to help Black

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communities in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests. In an article on Apartment Therapy's website, Deavens (2020) uses the George Floyd protests as a segue to discuss "mitigating the effects of racial disparities" by supporting Black businesses. The article cites Connie Evans, CEO of Association for Enterprise Opportunity who again explains how supporting Black entrepreneurs is necessary for building wealth in Black communities. The article connects Evans' point to the history of the Greenwood District (Black Wall Street) in Tulsa, OK. The 99th anniversary of the riots that dismantled this hub of Black enterprise coincided with the summer 2020 protests (Deavens, 2020). After thoroughly contextualizing the recent civil unrest using historical examples and long-term research, Deavens (2020) explains how and where readers can support Black businesses by purchasing from certain vendors, using Black Xchange (a Black-owned online retailor) to find products, and spotlighting Black creatives working in vintage arts, interior design, and artists. Choosing to feature Black laborers working in the aforementioned areas makes sense given Apartment Therapy's own endeavors, but this is a sharp contrast to other articles which simply list a few Black-owned restaurants or feature a handful of better-known Black influencers.

Although Black cultural critics and writers are shedding light on systemic issues facing Black-owned businesses, Black influencers are rendered uniquely vulnerable given the individualized nature of digital labor. One *Teen Vogue* article is comprised of lengthy quotes from Black female business owners and influencers who share their uncertainty regarding sharp increases in sales and attention during summer 2020 (Gore, 2020). Many of these women express excitement about the opportunities afforded by the situation but

are simultaneously wary about what this says about Black businesses that have long been struggling to survive. The word "visibility" shows up repeatedly here, and a couple women explain how fellow Black owners are hesitant to show their faces on social media and websites for fear that they may lose customers (Gore, 2020). Others quoted here put words to their uncomfortable feelings surrounding tokenism and fetishization in the wake of such intense attention from white consumers even as they wrestle with their own grief about George Floyd and so many others. One woman expresses her concern and distaste for the idea that Black brands are often viewed as trendy approaches to what is effectively slacktivism, stating "more Black-owned brands need to be featured and highlighted all the time – not just during Black History Month," echoing my interviewee Lauren's perspective about token attention (Gore, 2020; Lauren, interview, 2021). Gore's (2020) article delves deep into the complexities Black women entrepreneurs face as they grapple with their own racial reality on public platforms, amplified by the events of summer 2020.

My interviewee Sabine provides a telling account of what can happen when Black bodies and individuals are rendered visible through media and fandom, noting the resultant backlash that often ensues. Sabine tries to create a safe and inclusive space on her genre-focused channels, particularly for Black people who didn't necessarily grow up with access to comics or game shops and are often criticized for their lack of expertise compared to their white counterparts (Sabine, interview, 2022). She frames this form of fan-based bullying as "weaponized fandom" where white fans are "gatekeeping" who is

"allowed to be a fan" or who is "allowed to portray characters when they become

adapted" (Sabine, interview, 2022). Sabine adds:

> The person that is yelling and screaming about the fact that there shouldn't
> be Black elves in the new Lord of the Rings that's coming to Amazon is
> probably the same person who's yelling about how much they hate Black
> Lives Matter in 2020 […] it's not necessarily the fandom, it's society […]
> we see it explode in fandom (Sabine, interview, 2022).

Sabine's example highlights how hypervisibility disproportionately affects Black

people, pointing to the fact that criticism surrounding the presence of Black people in

media and fan spaces reflect larger, ongoing societal issues that have historically plagued

them. Because of the intensified scrutiny to which Black fans are often subject, Sabine

explains that she heavily moderates who has access to the mic in her live streams because

"as Black women, we get attacked on this app a lot" (Sabine, interview, 2022). In

drawing attention to the precarity of hypervisibility and working to create a space where

any blowback against Black women is shut down before it can begin, Sabine

demonstrates the work Black influencers are doing to carve space not only for

themselves, but also for other Black peoples and communities.

The Wage Gap

Black businesses already lack access to vital resources and institutional support,

and for Black influencers, the individual nature of influencing leaves them without an

infrastructure to combat systemic issues extended to the digital platforms on which they

work. Discussions about the massive wage disparity between white and Black influencers

are characterized by the naiveté of new influencers rather than a racist continuation of

economic suppression in much of the B2B press. In an exposé for Vox Media partner and

news site *The Verge*, Ashley Carman (2020) profiles the Instagram account Influencer

Pay Gap created by marketing strategist and influencer Adesuwa Ajayi and the hashtag

#OpenFohr to spotlight the wage disparities between white influencers and influencers of

color. The article lays bare the neoliberal logics undergirding venture labor, mapping how

increasingly individualized, precarious work amplifies the risk associated with

influencing. Because networks of resources and legal protections (e.g. unions, pay

standards, sick leave) don't exist in the same way for influencers, it can be more difficult

for Black influencers to ensure they are being compensated fairly. Influencer Pay Gap

attempts to remedy this situation by aggregating information about influencer projects,

corresponding pay, and horror stories to initiate more transparent conversations about the

racial and economic disparities in influencing work.

Several of my interviewees explained how fair compensation is difficult to secure

as an influencer with minimal resources or structural support to assist them. T notes that

she uses predetermined rates by working with "networks [that] connect [her] with

brands" (T, interview, 2022). As a blogger, her "rate has already been set with the

network," but if she is contacted by a brand directly, she has sometimes had to work with

a "stricter budget" which can result in lower pay (T, interview, 2022). During our

conversation, she mentioned how influencers across the board are underpaid:

> I get messages and emails all the time from people who just want to send
> me free product to promote them […] I wish that brands would recognize
> the weight that influencers or content creators have as true marketing
> tools. A lot of companies have a huge budget that they set aside for
> marketing, and I feel like so little of that makes it into the hands of the
> individuals who are promoting them, and so I would just like to see
> influencers or content creators get paid more for the work that they're
> doing (T, interview, 2022).

Many of my interviewees cite free product as proposed compensation in the contracts brands have sent them. As one interviewee states, "product doesn't pay the bills" (Devyn, 2022). Being underappreciated as creators is a common theme here, and some of the influencers I interviewed focus explicitly on how these "lowball" offers are sometimes subtly woven into the fabric of the contracts they receive (Lauren, interview, 2021). Liz mentions that it's "hard to negotiate your worth" when describing how contracts with brand partners work, states that "sometimes [brands] will sneak in there full rights in perpetuity to ownership of the content which means that they own all of the content forever" (Liz, interview, 2022). She explains that perpetuity refers to brands' contractual ability reuse content produced from a given campaign in the future without having to compensate the creators or anyone else involved in the initial creation of those images:

> A lot of times [Black creators] try to negotiate that down to like a term limit of whether it's on a monthly basis or by year. We try to negotiate that down to a term limit so that we're getting paid as influencers for what it's worth (Liz, interview, 2022).

Liz admits that thoroughly reading and understanding the language of these contracts takes practice which disproportionately effects newer influencers who have yet to secure multiple brand deals. Liz advises new creators, particularly Black creators, to "really […] read your contracts and stand your ground" (Liz, interview, 2022). While added clauses to contractual agreements are meant to slip past any potential influencer partner, both Liz and Devyn note that Black creators are at particular disadvantage given their limited visibility and partnership offers in the field of influencing.

Although Black influencers have an intimate understanding of the pay gap, outwardly addressing the issue can earn them a spot on a blacklist with potential brand partners. One *Huffington Post* article indicates that social media has provided a space for better Black representation, particularly in the form of Black influencers who integrate activism into their content about beauty, wellness, and education (Katsha; 2020). The rest of the article explores the unregulated terrain of influencing, examining how a lack of legal protections and transparency amplify widening wage gaps for Black influencers. Adesuwa Ajayi's Instagram account Influencer Pay Gap is spotlighted here as are other Black beauty vloggers. One influencer quoted in the article explicitly states that capitalism and consumerism is inherently anti-Black and asserts that speaking up about wage disparities presents a "double edged sword": addressing the issue on public platforms and in negotiations can result in better pay for a particular campaign but may alienate brands from working with Black influencers in the future (Katsha; 2020). Some influencers interviewed here point to unionizing and standardizing pay as next steps, alongside fostering better communication and solidarity between white and Black influencers. However, the risks remain the same. Black influencer unions can ensure fair compensation for all kinds of digital laborers but may potentially curb relations with future sponsors.

In The Drum piece about Black creators, Deighton (2020) explores the excuses brands make to explain away disproportionate pay for Black influencers. Eulanda Osagiede, a Black influencer quoted in the article, claims brands regularly cite the lack of a budget for particular and "specialized" campaigns as the reason for low or nonexistent

pay despite white influencers receiving payment for working on the same campaign (Deighton, 2020). Deighton (2020) quotes some of the intermediaries responsible for brokering negotiations with influencers to shed light on how decisions about payment are made. Three intermediaries chalk up the pay gap to differences in an influencer's reach (i.e. number of followers) and the practice of asking influencers to name their price rather than outright underpaying them. Two of them cite specific campaigns where white influencers were removed to create space for more influencers of color due to clients requesting more diversity. Such logic shifts blame to the 'ignorance' of individual influencers supported by the notion that building a standardized process for hiring influencers is not up to the company itself.

Adesuwa Ajayi's Instagram account Influencer Pay Gap showcases the extreme wage disparities between white and Black influencers. In one case, a white influencer was asked to participate in a L'Oréal campaign last minute for $6,000; when she arrived at the shoot, she was no longer needed but was compensated anyway (Dodgson, 2020). A Black influencer who had participated in the same campaign was paid $1,200 (Dodgson, 2020). The lack of regulation in influencing facilitates exploitation more easily, and brands often "gift" Black influencers for their work rather than paying them. In the same exposé for *Insider*, Dodgson (2020) also addresses the mental and emotional toll of being continually degraded as a Black influencer, relating the experience to imposter syndrome, and explains that Influencer Pay Gap anonymizes stories and posts to help shield Black influencers from further ostracization for speaking out about wage inequities. Again, highlighting the racially discriminatory practices in influencing work presents a double-

edged sword for Black influencers, forced to humbly accept work for lower pay without causing too much of a fuss.

A number of articles that comprise the media discourse focus on the Instagram account Influencer Pay Gap and the open letter to Fohr. An article on the Ion website briefly spotlights Influencer Pay Gap and the Fohr letter mentioned in both the Carman (2020) and Flora (2020) pieces to draw attention to the wage gap but offers little context for why the disparity exists or how it reflects ongoing systemic issues (Lai, 2020). Schiffer's (2020) piece in *Vogue Business* similarly discusses the account Influencer Pay Gap and wage disparities in influencing as well as the role discriminatory algorithms play in marginalizing minority content online. Schiffer (2020) offers solutions for how brands can do better by hiring Black influencers as brand ambassadors (longer-term work/positions) rather than hiring them once for individual campaigns. The Instagram account and open letter are certainly noteworthy and timely within the context of summer 2020, but many of the articles about Influencer Pay Gap use the same quotes from the same Black influencers and spotlight the same examples. This could be the result of aggregate reporting, choosing to focus on the most recognizable examples, or failing to dig a little deeper in exploring the issue.

In another telling example, Ted Murphy, CEO and founder of IZEA, discusses IZEA's recent report about the pay gaps in an interview segment for Yahoo Finance, citing recent civil unrest as a contributing factor to limiting that gap (Myers, 2021). Black influencer Erica Alayne joins the conversation and contextualizes some of the findings in the report, drawing on her experience as an influencer who prioritizes antiracist activism

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in her content. After hearing that the average Instagram post can generate as much as $1,600 for influencers, the reporter interviewing both professionals jokingly comments that it's time for her to make a career change which seems to be a mischaracterization of the discussion itself; the average potential income per post does not fully account for racial or gender differences, nor does it paint a clear picture about the wide variances in pay for different types of labor in the field. The video title itself ("Black influencers earned most per post in 2020") is also misleading as Murphy explicitly states that Black influencers have received more brand deals at higher rates in 2020 but still face wage discrimination across platforms (Myers, 2021). Focusing on which (Black) influencers generated the most revenue per unit insinuates that the pay disparity between white and Black creators has closed and presumes that their earnings will stay consistent in the future. In this way, short-term successes are used as evidence that structural discrimination has also been resolved.

CNBC (2021) conducted a similar interview with Jarrid Tingle of Harlem Capital Partners who discusses the need for aspiring minority entrepreneurs to have better access to education and capital to fund their endeavors. This interview challenges the narrative that anyone can become a self-made professional by drawing attention to disparities in generational wealth and annual income in white and Black communities. Tingle also asserts that diversifying leadership and company makeup needs to happen at the outset for budding startups or new initiatives as it can be difficult to break up an already homogenized group due to familiarity and the presence of groupthink, stating that companies need to "stay nimble" (CNBC, 2021). This is a sentiment present in a few

Tumblr posts about racial inclusivity in work which argue that it's more affordable and efficient to integrate inclusive policies into new and growing endeavors than it is to revise them later. Taken together, Tingle's interview and the Tumblr posts explicitly reveal flaws in a predominantly white capitalist system; neoliberal ideals about individual labor and merit are thus difficult to internalize for Black actors who are tasked with finding success in a system that "was not created for them" (Dreamers & Doers, 2020).

Other media outlets have similarly sought context from Black influencers about pay disparities. One podcast featured a lengthy roundtable discussion between several Black influencers who discuss wage disparities in influencing work (Adey, 2019). This podcast is quite similar to the popular press articles that explore the Black influencer pay gap, individual stories shedding light on familiar excuses about brands not having a budget for work requested from Black influencers. Tokenism in a large part of the discussion here, as is the idea that Black influencers produce niche content that is less applicable to brand campaigns intended to target wider audiences. In response to a question about the position in which the wage gap leaves Black influencers, one guest stated "[n]o one is you and that is you power" (Adey, 2019). The phrase is predicated on the idea that Black influencers are inherently unique and authentic which, in turn, becomes their greatest bargaining chip at the negotiation table.

Conclusion

Amid the George Floyd protests and calls for accountability, brands and institutions have continued to posit individualized economic solutions to racial strife. Meaningful conversations about racial justice and actionable, long-term solutions stop

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short or are cluttered with corporate actors making their platforms and services better suited for individual acts of support. Following Black influencers is hailed as a viable solution to uplift Black communities that ultimately obscures a system which has historically failed and contuse to fail Black people. Rather than initiating conversations about prison abolition, marijuana laws, or defunding police, focus is instead shifted to underpaid individual Black actors or directed to multibillion dollar companies like Uber that offer financial and cultural incentives to increase engagement through their own platforms. These solutions pose economic distractions to much more immediate issues facing Black communities and offer a performative, hollow bout of support.

Despite corporate and societal refusals to acknowledge or meaningfully address systemic racism, Black users are carving spaces for themselves in both promotion and critical discourse. In a community submission on Blavity's website, J Slacker (2019) discusses how influencing work enables Black individuals to challenge longstanding stereotypes in more fluid and publicly visible ways. For instance, Black influencers are altering normative standards of beauty through YouTube vlogs and highlighting the varied, dynamic interests typically coded as white: nerd culture, interior design, health and nutrition, to name a few. Slacker (2019) states that these varied depictions of Blackness humanize minority communities and show young Black children a myriad of possible paths, careers, and interests available to them. This contrasts part of the narrative about Black excellence which homogenizes Black experiences and communities, instead pushing audiences and consumers to think about Blackness apart from prevailing stereotypes like those outlined in the George the Poet piece earlier in this dissertation.

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However, increased celebrity status for Black content creators also poses particular risks by virtue of digital media's publicly visible nature which is, in turn, amplified by influencing's competitive and commercialized context.

Where influencing creates space for Black influencers to engage in more individualizing and humanizing discussions about race, certain digital platforms provide Black content creators with the discursive space to do the same. Tumblr works as a space where Black feminism can flourish and Black feminist scholarship, histories, and experiences can be shared and communally analyzed. From PDFs of bell hooks' work to history lessons about the importance of Black braided styles as political resistance in slave colonies, the platform is home to Black culture and critique. Specifically, content creators on #BlackTumblr contribute heavily to "technocultural discourses" that structure digital experiences of race, appropriation, and influencing alike (Brock, 2012). Although their work is distinct from beauty vlogging or Instagram modeling, contributing to the discourse about racialization, feminism, and capital is their mode of digital labor. Most of the Black creators I interviewed dislike the term "influencer" for themselves, but their work hits many of the marks of digital Black content creators in traversing the personal, political, and educational.

Between short-term solutions to the influencer pay gap and pushing brands, users, and audiences to follow Black influencers and order from Black-owned restaurants after George Floyd's murder, Black identity is robbed of its political valence. Framed in terms of their economic potential and ability to placate distressed white audiences, Black influencers are exploited for their brand value and perceived expertise about race. Black

creators are instructed to leverage their own erotic and cultural capital to achieve their

goals within a meritocracy that promises equal opportunities for individual agents.

Although neoliberal logics about racialized and gendered labor attempt to distract

individuals from the material effects of one's race, gender, and class identity in such a

sphere, Black influencers are intimately familiar how their identities shape their

experience in such a commercial sphere. Their sheer presence in influencing work marks

them as both Other and visible, politicizing their existence in digital labor even as they

fight to claim more varied, humanizing, and idiosyncratic ideas about Black womanhood.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

> Hot take: actually addressing the material needs of Black people would upend the entire capitalist system, so we're given representation and expected to be appeased by hypervisibility instead (politijohn, 2021).

The Tumblr post above demonstrates the level of reflection and awareness with which many Black creators operate. The fact that their bodies are tokenized and their labor is undervalued is no secret to Black influencers moving in commercial spheres. Systemic discrimination is firmly entrenched in the platforms on which many influencers work, and Black creators have their vulnerabilities exacerbated by exploitative practices in brand partnerships, visual commercial work, and the aftermath of George Floyd's murder.

The Black feminine body is thoroughly commodified, serving as a source of tangible brand value for brands and companies looking to collaborate with Black influencers. By virtue of influencing's commercial context, Black influencers are instructed to 'lean in' to their racial and gender identity to appear as authentic agents to potential brand partners and digital users. The tag #BlackGirlMagic represents the intersection of neoliberal logics, self-promotion, and racialized and gendered subjectivities, and works to pins notions of Black womanhood to 'hustle and grind' discourse in an attempt to stoke entrepreneurial spirit. By focusing on Black influencers' capital and cultural currency in the wake of the George Floyd protests, brands and companies shifted attention away from systemic issues (e.g. police brutality, the pay gap)

and toward their own ventures and industries. In this way, brands and digital users appropriated Black creators' bodies and voices toward explicitly capitalist ends.

As Black influencers navigate prevailing stereotypes about the Black feminine body and the competitive terrain of influencing which renders them both vulnerable and visible, the glamor of influencing works to mask the uniquely embodied struggles of Black women who are carving a space for themselves on digital platforms. The experiences of Black influencers exist at the intersection of identity, politics, and celebrity, wherein a fraught politics of representation clashes with the status ascribed to micro-celebrities. The seemingly incompatible dichotomy provides the backdrop for the unique struggles Black influencers face and tensions surrounding Black women's hypervisibility online. Part of the criticism Black influencers face is situated within this very dynamic where class solidarity is prioritized over racial solidarity. Here, the underlying logic is that liberation for the individual is possible and desirable, yet liberation for the many remains a distant and unrealistic dream.

Part of what makes influencing a lucrative and effective type of neoliberal labor is that celebrity becomes politically palatable, distracting users from systemic structures that are ultimately left in place on digital platforms. Celebrity status masks neoliberal logics so well, in part, because it draws affinity from already powerful people and institutions. Sympathy is largely garnered from white audiences and people, and for Black women working as influencers, part of the question then becomes to what extent they make themselves palatable to white audiences. As a point of consideration, the extent to which an influencer's audience is raced at all is a question these women must

navigate as they craft their digital persona, personal brand, and their content. In turn, this decision also shapes the degree to which Black influencers integrate racial justice issues and political content into their material, amplifying the tensions between public expectations for what Black women should be willing to do or discuss online and their personal desire to live peacefully and produce content on their own terms.

The uneven nature of celebrity connected to economic capital flattens political projects which can be bought, sold, and consumed by digital audiences enabled by the fact that the digital platforms best suited to conventional forms of influencing such as Instagram and YouTube render bodies and space consumable by virtue of their particular platform affordances (Stevens, 2021). Questions of critique, authenticity, and political liberation become conflated within the commercial and visual field of influencing. In particular, social movements are brought into the market in which they become commercially palatable for individual users and digital audiences. For instance, buying from Black businesses and following Black influencers were propped up as optimal solutions in the media discourse following the George Floyd protests rather than also initiating public discussions about the way institutions such as prisons exist as a modern continuation of slavery. Here, racial justice is understood through primarily economic means and individuals are encouraged to divert their spending toward Black people, communities, and businesses more often in the wake of moments of crisis. These near-sighted solutions shed light on the fact that Black political projects sit at the intersection of identity, liberation, and consumerism.

Amid the backdrop of a cultural landscape which makes racial justice intelligible through its ability to be addressed within the market, Black influencers walk a tightrope as they attempt to present themselves as authentic individuals within a mode of labor that necessarily reifies the racialization and commodification of their bodies. On one hand, a Black influencer's racial identity affords them cultural capital, yet their success simultaneously isolates Black users who no longer view them as 'living the struggle' or as unable to identify with Black groups and individuals who themselves are unable to enter the lucrative work of influencing. Yet, these influencers are not actually free from systemic discrimination evidenced through the wage gap between Black influencers and their white counterparts. Racial projects and Black bodies thus become the canvas on which capital is reaped and sowed, exploited for their cultural appeal and economic capital while continuing to suffer severe institutional failings within a system that has never truly provided equal means of participation.

The balancing act Black influencers navigate on digital platforms reveals how cultural critique finds a home on social media sites like Tumblr in ways that become obscured on more visual platforms like Instagram and YouTube. The tension between the visually and verbally discursive places Black women in a complicated space, one in which they are fetishized and commodified yet are also expected to engage with and educate white audiences, particularly in the aftermath of racial controversy. Here, their authenticity is measured not only by the warmth of their personalities and glimpses into their daily lives as is expected of influencers, but also by the legitimacy of the political projects to which they attach themselves. Black influencers are not only expected to

speak on issues of racial justice but are also expected to do so within the confines of a careful script meant to appease white audiences; they should be passionate but not too brash; they should be kind to users to query them about deeply personal and racist issues, yet one verbal slip could mean condemnation.

The legacy of racism and sexism is written into Black women's skin, one they must inhabit as they move within these commercial spheres. Black trauma has become fodder for brands, media, and politicians who invite Black people to enter the market on their own terms, a sphere from which they have long been excluded. Integrating political content into their digital personae, Black influencers are encouraged to commodify their own racialization in order to attain success. In this way, racial justice becomes a marker of a Black influencer's authenticity. The more a Black influencer chooses to speak on Black issues, the more credibility they attain, a necessary component of becoming a successful influencer. Thus, Black influencers must associate themselves with Blackness in order to maximize their authenticity for Black and white audiences alike.

Moreover, the existence of activist Black influencers, particularly those whose content is both commercial and political in nature, further challenges the working definition that influencers are characterized namely or solely by the existence of partnerships and specially curated content. Indeed, when interviewing several participants, I found myself flipping back and forth between my interview protocol for activist influencers and that for beauty and lifestyle vloggers. The work Black influencers are doing often straddles the line between the commercial and the political. In addition to challenging traditional ideas about influencing through the content they produce, Black

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influencers also navigate systemic issues in their work. Because Black influencers are affected by a massive wage disparity and must navigate the perils of both misogynoir and hypervisibility online, they do not internalize neoliberal sentiments in nearly the same way as white influencers (Duffy, 2015; Pruchniewska, 2018). Resistance to neoliberal ideals is not being minimized through blind complacency because the illusion of equality does not work for Black influencers. For Black women, it is evident that influencing is burdened with the same institutional discriminatory practices they face elsewhere. They cannot and do not buy into the logic of neoliberal labor in the same way because they are still vulnerable even as successful influencers.

Drawing on Gallego's (2016) arguments about the kinds of change needed to shift perceptions of Blackness and Black womanhood, the work Black influencers and creators are doing across platforms is doing just that. Black influencers are shifting narratives from Black bodies to people through what Gallego (2016) calls warmth, representation, and intimacy. From the unique types of authenticity performed by Black influencers who straddle the line between beauty vloggers and activists, they are working to afford Black women individuality. Part of what white followers ran up against when following Black influencers in mass during 2020 is the idea that Black influencers are not a singular group, nor does their racial identity dictate what their content might address or who they might be. White audiences were forced to confront their assumptions that Black influencers are necessarily interested in and speak about racial justice upon realizing that some Black creators wanted to focus on classical literary analysis or makeup tutorials instead.

Self-love is another popular dimension of Black influencing in ways that differ from self-help discourses typically associated with influencers (Gill & Scharff, 2013). One of my interview participants, Lauren, notes "that it's important for [her] to interject" her normally identity-based content with posts about "things that aren't just educational or talking about my tribe or talking about my lived experience always. It's okay to talk about joy or to show interest." For Lauren, expressing herself in ways that do not explicitly hail her racial identity is and "empowering decision" (Lauren, interview, 2021). By loving themselves, "staying true" to themselves, and actively trying to increase representation in a commercial space characterized by precarity, Black influencers are doing meaningful work to carve out alternative notions of Black womanhood and challenge what it means and looks like to be Black. Although the space is still fraught with racial and economic tensions, Black influencers are working to give Black identity new meaning apart from its overt politicization and associated with Black tragedy. In this way, Black influencers are reclaiming their voices and perceptions about Black womanhood through their explicit dedication to making the work of influencing a safer, more equitable space not only for themselves, but for other content creators as well.

Reflecting on My Own Position

It would be negligent not to address my own position in completing this project. Yes, the work of having to continually examine the way Black influencers are often forced to address Black tragedy and navigate an explicitly racist, sexist, and classist system has been trying. Tears have been shed, ugly bouts of rage have become more prominent in conversations with my loved ones, and I would be lying if I said I did not

consider leaving academia based on the research area to which I have dedicated myself. Talking with other Black women about the emotional strain they experience as part of their working and reading the horror stories of brands exploiting Black women toward their own ends has made my own anxieties and deeply felt vulnerabilities newly raw.

In my professional life, I am also always marked as a *Black* scholar or as someone who "does race." It is true that I study Black identity, racialization, and the way digital platforms exacerbate longstanding systemic issues. Yet, in my current academic position, I cannot help but feel the precarity of hypervisibility as it shapes the way my peers and superiors think of me or mis-characterize the work that I do. As a Black woman recently hired as part of a DEI-ordered cluster hire of Black scholars whose purpose is to build race into a curriculum where it was scant before, I feel pressure to engage race in ways that I have not previously been expected to. As much as my own racial and gender identity is used to provide evidence that academic systems, be they doctoral programs or tenure-track jobs, have and are operating as they should, I find that I must constantly explain and validate my work – and thus, myself – at every turn. I am the one receiving pushback from students on course evaluations and in real-time class discussions who do not think conversations about race belong in a class about media. I am the one serving on numerous committees designed to meet DEI initiatives yet focus largely on performative, additive measures than meaningful inclusion. I am the one made to feel my being every time I step into a classroom. The stakes are different for me.

I am part of the monolith that is Black scholars who are mistakenly assumed to be comfortable addressing race in any situation, in any capacity, and at any time. My inbox

is populated with emails from peers and faculty sending along articles about another Black man killed by police, about cultural appropriation on Tik Tok, about declining Black student populations at various universities, about Black-authored texts that have been banned in schools, about the attack on critical race theory. My superiors often lament my having to teach large lecture courses – for which there is little institutional support – at the expense of my research. They tell me what a shame it is that I have to focus on students instead of taking more time to pursue my work about Black influencers, Black media, and cultural appropriation. They stress the intrinsic value of what I do in studying Black identity, hail its importance because "people need to know about this stuff." My current position provides me with a livable wage, career security, and the luxury of a flexible schedule with large chunks of unstructured time, yet I find myself feeling unstable and underserved. The irony of earning a tenure track job at an R1 institution and still feeling vulnerable is not lost on me. Like the influencers I interviewed, I have found success in my field and yet I still feel more exposed and misrepresented than I did a year ago.

The fact that I feel similarly to the influencers I interviewed for my project is not a coincidence. If anything, my experiences during the pandemic, the George Floyd protests, the 2020 presidential election, and in my current academic position help demonstrate the sheer reach of neoliberal logics and capitalist competition that shape Black women's labor no matter the sphere of work in which they find themselves. That is to say, the appropriation of Black women's bodies, the mischaracterization of their voices, and expectations about how they should present themselves or educate white

audiences are not solely or uniquely the byproduct of pursuing influencing as a career.

These logics and problems are not solely or uniquely the result of largely unregulated

digital platforms. Nor are they solely or uniquely the result of individual users who ruin it

for the rest of us. Black women's bodies and our pain have been commodified for

centuries, made fodder for white audiences who can never fully feel what's at stake when

we are made to speak about race, to perpetually be aware of ourselves, to frequently be

"subjected to" in our daily lives (Hartman, 1997).

Perhaps my greatest contribution to the literature on influencing is my explicit

focus on Black influencers who are severely underrepresented in scholarship about both

venture labor and influencing alike (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Gill

& Scharff, 2013; Marwick, 2013). My project provides a space for Black creators who

are overwhelmingly women to share their experiences, struggles, and motivations.

Moreover, the literature on neoliberal logics that necessarily inform scholarship about

precarious venture labor is largely totalizing in its conceptualization of individuals who

internalize these logics as they aspire to achieve their dreams in a competitive

commercial terrain that offers them little support and protection (Giddens, 2013; Szeman,

2015). Although some of this literature acknowledges how neoliberal discourses about

amateurism and entrepreneurial spirit must contort themselves in their appeal to minority

communities, much of the scholarship still focuses on how these discourses exploit

difference and leverage post-feminist and post-racial discourses to do so rather than focus

on individual actors (Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008; Gilbert, 2016; Goldberg, 2009).

Through my interviews with Black creators, I examine how these neoliberal logics get to

work and an individual level and find that Black creators do not internalize these logics the same way as their white counterparts; because Black women are so precariously positioned online, their bodies simultaneously commodified, fetishized, and scrutinized, the totalizing logic of neoliberal discourses are not as easily adopted.

Although mapping the way economic solutions are positioned as a viable means to address racial strife is not new, the civil unrest following the George Floyd protests in summer 2020 provides a unique and useful framing for understanding the conflicting tensions at play for Black influencers who were suddenly thrust into the spotlight. Hypervisibility is an ever-present condition of Black women's existence online, but the context of summer 2020 provides insight as to how those precarities are rendered intelligible and tangible. Not only does this project examine the experiences of Black creators rendered newly visible and vulnerable by a national watershed moment, but it also considers how brands and digital media companies inserted themselves – and Black influencers – into public conversations about how best to respond to and manage the immediate concerns about systemic change. Because of the media attention and political upheaval following George Floyd's murder left brands, journalists, and media companies scrambling to provide their audiences with instruction, Black influencers were positioned as an individualized solution to racial justice and hailed as a singular monolith who had the ability and desire to educate newly radicalized white audiences about race.

This multimodal project weaves together scholarship on influencing, neoliberal logics, racialized subjectivities, and histories of Black women's commodification to examine the way Black influencers are framed as enterprising individuals willing to and

capable of addressing racial justice and how they navigate the commercial terrain of influencing. However, there are several methodological shortcomings that should be noted. Although my interviews with Black influencers were incredibly rich and informative, I was unable to successfully recruit any creators from Tumblr. #BlackTumblr provided some useful insights about how Black communities frame and discuss Black creators, Black women, and cultural appropriation, but I am unable to draw any conclusions about the way Black creators might navigate this highly anonymized platform whose racial affordances may provide a distinctly different experience relative to the way Black women's hypervisibility is felt online. Future research may consider alternative methods of recruiting these individuals. Rather than direct messages or tagging on posts which might potentially feel invasive for creators working in a largely anonymous space, inviting participation by way of creating an account that allows users to submit content (stories, images, etc.) or joining Tumblr communities and group chats could provide a more effective strategy for talking with Black creators on the site.

Additionally, my project focuses on the media discourse about Black influencers and #BlackTumblr's conceptualization of Black culture, entrepreneurship, and Black women. Examining how Black influencers are discussed on Twitter, especially on #BlackTwitter, would also provide a rich area of study for scholars interested in technocultural discourses focused on racialized digital communities. In particular, the contrast between #BlackTumblr's more intimate and semi-private engagement with race and #BlackTwitter's more publicly visible engagement well-suited to brevity could be an illuminating direction for future research as well, highlighting each platform's unique

racial affordances in terms of what they contribute to the way digital Black communities make sense of Black creators.

An excellent example of research about Black women's relationship to technology comes in the form of Knight Steele's (2021) work on digital Black feminism. Knight Steele's book provides a working road map for how future research considers Black women's longstanding intimacy with technology and entrepreneurship. Bringing together centuries-old literature and combing digital archives of Black women-authored texts, Knight Steele (2021) examines how Black feminism has become "a digital product" through its rich yet accessible engagement in online contexts. With sharp considerations of how Black women negotiate their own agency and authorship amid the increasingly commodified landscape of digital media, Knight Steele utilizes a set of powerful conceptual tools to demonstrate how Black women's work, activism, and lives are characterized by hypervisibility yet simultaneously position them as invaluable thought leaders and curators of technocultural practices.

Although the legacy of slavery which renders our bodies commodities in the first place cannot be ignored, Black women still find ways to exist. Black influencers still find ways to support themselves and each other, from fighting for equal pay to affording themselves individuality by showcasing their own hobbies and interests that exist outside of being Black. I recently took up watercolor and am working on an African-inspired fantasy novel. For Black influencers, the work is never quite done. There will always be ignorant comments in their inboxes, brand partners that demand an educational component as part of a contract, and people who assume their willingness to address

Black tragedy when it inevitably happens. But as several of my participants stated, Black

influencers are not only doing this for themselves – they are also doing this for other

Black women. There is a noticeable "void" on digital platforms where Black women are

underrepresented, and content creation not only provides access for people who want to

get creative with digital tools or initiate political action, it also provides Black women

with both autonomy and community (Lauren, interview, 2021; Sky, interview, 2021).

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APPENDIX A:

ANONYMIZED LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

A, interview, 14 December 2021

Devyn, interview, 15 February 2022

Dominique, interview, 11 February 2022

Lauren, interview, 7 December 2021

Liz, interview, 18 February 2022

Sabine, interview, 3 March 2022

Sky, interview, 12 November 2021

Tara, interview, 10 February 2022

T, interview, 17 February 2022

APPENDIX B:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR BLACK INFLUENCERS:

BEAUTY VLOGGERS AND LIFESTYLE INFLUENCERS

1. Tell me a little bit about your account/channel/brand.

2. What inspired you to pursue that work on social media? Tell me more about that.

3. Tell me about how you first broke into the industry. What was that like?

4. What does a typical day look like for you? How do you spend your time day to day?

5. From the initial idea to its distribution on (the platform they use), walk me through your process of content creation.

6. Where did you learn how to build your brand and grow your following?

7. Who are you trying to reach with your content? Who is your audience and what are they like?

8. How do you stay motivated when doing this kind of work?

9. Do you or have you ever partnered with brands/companies in the content creation process? How do those partnerships influence the work you do and/or the content you create?

10. How do you select which brands/companies to work with and/or promote?

11. In your own words, what kind of persona/identity/image are you trying to create?

12. Do you feel pressured to perform a certain kind of identity or be a certain kind of person?

13. Is that persona/identity/image easier to achieve on (the platform the use)?

14. Does (the platform they use) ever make it difficult to curate the kind of persona/identity/image you're aiming for? How so?

15. Are there other influencers/vloggers/etc. who do similar work on different platforms? What are your thoughts on their content? Does the platform seem to work for them?

16. How would you describe an "influencer" and/or what they do?

17. Do you consider yourself an influencer? Why so?

18. As an influencer/vlogger/etc. do you feel the need to address larger societal or cultural issues? Why so?

19. Do you typically address these issues in your content, as specialized posts/videos, or elsewhere?

20. How do you think addressing cultural issues affects the way people perceive your content, if at all?

21. Has the way you think about influencing/vlogging changed since you started doing it?

22. How has being a Black creator shaped your experiences in this line of work?

23. If you could say anything to brands, social media users, etc., what would it be/what would you want them to know?

24. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

APPENDIX C:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR BLACK INFLUENCERS

DIGITAL ACTIVISTS

1. Tell me a little bit about your account/channel.

2. How would you describe your mission/goal?

3. What inspired you to pursue that work on social media? Tell me more about that.

4. Why have you chosen to use (the platform they use), specifically, for your work?

5. Which audiences are you trying to reach? Where can you typically find those
    groups?

6. What are some of the advantages in using this platform and not others? Some of
    the drawbacks?

7. Are there other accounts who do similar work on different platforms? What are
    your thoughts on their content? Does their use of those platforms seem effective?

8. What does a typical day look like for you? How do you spend your time day to
    day?

9. From the initial idea to its circulation on (the platform they use), walk me through
    your process of creating and posting content.

10. What is the most difficult part about running this account/channel? How do you
    stay motivated to do it?

11. How would you describe an "influencer" and/or the work they do?

12. Do you consider yourself an influencer? Why so?

13. As an account/channel on (the platform they use), to what extent do you feel the need to address larger cultural and/or political issues?

14. How do you address and engage those issues through your work on (the platform they use)?

15. How do you think addressing cultural and/or political issues affects the way people perceive your account/channel?

16. Do you feel pressured to perform a certain kind of identity or be a certain kind of person? How does that persona/identity/image shape the content you produce?

17. Has the way you think about activism changed since you started running this account/channel?

18. How has being a Black creator shaped your experiences in this line of work?

19. If you could say anything to brands, social media users, etc., what would it be/what would you want them to know?

20. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

APPENDIX D:

VERBIAGE FOR RECRUITMENT

For the purposes of this project, I recruited participants through their public-facing

accounts online. This included email (if included on their account/channel/page/website),

direct messaging, and tagging "@-ing" in notes and/or comments section of certain

platforms. I have included some sample verbiage detailing my initial method of contact

for reaching Black influencers across digital platforms.

Email:

Hi (name),

My name is Wesley, and I'm a PhD student at Temple University. I study media and

race, and for my dissertation is about Black content creators' experiences online.

Part of my dissertation includes interviews with people who I see doing this kind of work,

and I think you would be a wonderful fit for this project. I was wondering whether you'd

be available for an interview as part of my project? The interview would be conducted

through Zoom and should last about 30-45 minutes.

If you would like more information about the project or have any questions, you can

reach me at (include my social media contact info and email here). Thanks so much for

your consideration!

Direct message on Instagram, Tumblr, YouTube, and websites:

Hey (insert name, if provided on social media)! My name is Wesley, and I'm a PhD student at Temple University. I study media and race, and my dissertation is about Black content creators. Would you be available for a 30-45 minute interview on Zoom? You can message me here (on the platform where the communication took place) or email me at (my email address) for info about the project. Thank you so much!

Tagging on Instagram and Tumblr:

@name Hey (their name or handle), I'm a PhD student and currently working on my dissertation. It's about Black content creators, and I would love to interview you as part of my project! Dm me if you're interested or have questions!