

This pre-print paper is copyright of the author, but it is free to be used for research purposes as long as it is properly attributed. Permissions for multiple reproductions should be addressed to the author.

Please cite as: Glatt, Z. and Banet-Weiser, S. (2021). 'Productive ambivalence, economies of visibility and the political potential of feminist YouTubers' in Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (eds.) *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*. New York, USA: NYU Press.

Productive ambivalence, economies of visibility and the political potential of feminist YouTubers

Zoë Glatt and Sarah Banet-Weiser

“I’m gonna talk about my responsibility as a YouTuber, as an Internet cousin, as someone you just know from within the confines of this screen, of this box, of this device, of the 1s and 0s - you know what I’m saying - of the algorithm that brought me to you. What’s my responsibility to you?”

Evelyn from the Internets, “Do I have to be an Internet Social Justice Warrior” published January 31, 2017.

Evelyn from the Internets is one of many YouTube content creators who use their platform to express progressive political values, as well as to entertain viewers, brand herself (Evelyn sells a variety of merchandise with her ‘Magical Black Girl’ slogan) and promote products from sponsors. In this particular video, Evelyn talks about what her responsibility is to her followers. She says she wants to “feel all these feelings” with them, but also discusses how her job is not to engage in “Internet rage” about the world. Though she notes that these kinds of reactions are justified, she positions herself as a “Capri Sun when you are thirsty”, aiming for her content to be refreshing, light and enjoyable. Clearly her answer to the question that titles the video is no, she doesn’t have to be an Internet Social Justice Warrior. She ends by saying this video is sponsored by Audible by Amazon and recommends African-American author Ta-nehesi Coates’ book *Between the World and Me* as part of her sponsorship.

Evelyn is just one of many YouTube content creators who emphasize contemporary political issues and controversies around gender, race and sexuality. While others are not as explicit as Evelyn on the question of a YouTuber’s responsibility to their followers, we begin with this example because we are interested in the relationships that are constructed and assumed between feminist content creators and their followers, and how feminist politics partly form the parameters of these relationships. Of all the social media platforms that have garnered attention in the past decade for the promises of widespread access for ordinary individuals, perhaps none has achieved the kind of visibility as YouTube, the world’s most popular site for online video. Here, entrepreneurial content creators are harnessing the platform to build their own brands within the emerging social media entertainment industry, or SME (Cunningham and Craig 2019). Feminist content is a well-established genre on YouTube, in which creators post political and social commentary on topics such as intersectionality, politics, gender and sexual identity alongside comedic, lifestyle, and personality-driven fare. While looking to advance feminist cultural agendas, these creators are situated within an economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2018), incentivized to adopt certain norms and trends if they wish to garner likes, views and subscribers. We situate these creators, and their content, within the cultural context of popular feminism. Popular feminism is part of a larger context of what Catherine Rottenberg has called “neoliberal feminism,” where corporate- and media-friendly feminist expressions achieve a heightened visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are often obscured (Banet-Weiser 2018; Rottenberg, 2014; McRobbie, 2009). In other words, many of these creators both advance and profit from popular feminism: brand-safe feminist discourses that dovetail comfortably with neoliberal agendas. Seeing and hearing a safely affirmative feminism, in spectacularly visible ways often eclipses a feminist critique of structure; the visibility of popular feminism on YouTube is important but it often stops there, as *visibility*. That said, the platform has also provided a cultural space for more marginal groups and radical left-wing politics to flourish; the visibility of diverse, LGBTQ and gender-fluid identities on YouTube far outstrips its broadcast media counterparts.

YouTube has been lauded as a utopian space for ordinary users outside the greedy hands of corporate gatekeepers as it simultaneously has been vilified as the height of narcissistic self-branding, threatening “authentic” media production with its insatiable appetite for young superficial content

creators. As with every development of a new technology, a utopic/dystopic discourse frames YouTube's creation and reception and, we argue, as many have about emerging media technologies, this framing does not help push us forward to a more nuanced analysis of the cultural impact of YouTube. Here, we attempt such a nuanced analysis by positioning feminist YouTube content within what Burgess and Green (2018) have called a 'cultural system', one that both provides openings and foreclosures for specific kinds of cultural and political participation. We situate our analysis within the broad context of popular feminism, comprised of neoliberal feminist images, expressions and practices that circulate with speed and reach on multiple media platforms (Banet-Weiser 2018).

Specifically, we theoretically frame our analysis within the popular feminist economies of visibility and, following feminist theorists Clare Hemmings and Lauren Berlant, an interrelated theoretical analytic of productive ambivalence, to analyse content creators in a cultural, economic and social context of popular feminism. The work of feminist content creators on YouTube is complex and we resist a reductive explanatory frame here. YouTube has been celebrated by many as a platform that has enabled far more diverse screen representations of race, gender and sexuality than television and film media, as is undoubtedly the case. However, feminist YouTube creators have to navigate what are often contradictory pressures in order to gain visibility and earn a living, such as appealing to commercial brands whilst simultaneously maintaining authenticity and relatability with their audiences (Cunningham and Craig 2017). With this framework of ambivalence, we aim to complicate the dominance of popular feminism online by asking: to what extent are professional YouTube content creators able to present more radical versions of feminism, or else pushed to fit into neoliberal brand culture in order to gain visibility and income?

The context of popular feminism: economies of visibility and productive ambivalence

We examine YouTubers who can be positioned within a broad context of "popular feminism," which Banet-Weiser (2018) defines as a contemporary feminist media environment that relies on the (relatively) broad accessibility and reach of digital and social media to circulate particular feminist messages. Part of the "popular" of popular feminism indicates that some versions and iterations of feminism will become more visible than others, and because popular feminism often depends on the affordances of capitalist media platforms for circulation, the versions that have the most heightened visibility are typically those that are aligned with capitalist logic (see also Catherine Rottenberg 2018).

But another element of popular feminism involves the various power struggles on popular cultural terrains (such as YouTube), where different expressions and practices compete for dominance. We see these kinds of navigations within feminist YouTubers, where some of the most "popular" (defined by numbers of followers) are precisely those who create content about topics that have less visibility in mainstream media, such as trans and queer issues. Again, the political potentialities of YouTube as a platform for social change are often framed within a utopic/dystopic binary: it is either described as a space where freedom of expression reigns, unfettered by corporate gatekeepers, confidently leading to social change; or it is a completely colonized media platform with the sole purpose of capital accumulation. Remaining within this binary is unproductive, not least because it both over- and under-estimates what media platforms can do as a starting point for social change. That is, because media platforms are structured by algorithms organized by capitalist logic, it does not make sense to insist that they enable freedom of expression. On the other hand, capitalism is not always organized in predictable and stable ways, so media platforms such as YouTube can exploit this instability. As the 2nd most popular website in the world, preceded only by its parent company Google (Collins 2019), YouTube is undoubtedly a central player in the current social media ecosystem. Since its inception in 2005, YouTube has accumulated over 1.9 billion logged-in users each month, 500 hours of content uploaded every minute, and over 1 billion hours of content watched daily (YouTube 2019). Yet, when digital media platforms such

as YouTube become so central in such a rapid period of time, it is tempting to definitively claim what YouTube *is*: in a time of information glut, constant media circulation, dis- and mis-information, and political upheavals, we often reach for certainties about media and what it apparently can do in terms of political and social change. We seek to provide distinct parameters around media platforms, as if having control over the theoretical definition of media platforms and media use will allow us to have control in other realms of cultural life.

Yet, we argue that the ambivalence we see framing many feminist content creators on YouTube offer conflicting and often contradictory feminist politics, and it is precisely these conflicting views that we find the most productive to make sense of contemporary feminist politics. As Clare Hemmings points out in her work on feminist ambivalence, feminist politics often disavow feminism even as they retain critiques of gender relations; this contradiction is often “the result of a complex set of negotiations all gendered subjects make and that cannot always be resolved” (2018, p. 75). Contemporary popular feminist politics achieve a heightened visibility, which competes with an equally heightened visibility of popular misogyny, increasing normalizations of racism and white nationalism, and the emergence of the extreme right across the globe. Rather than insist that feminist content creators are either enabling or inhibiting feminist politics, or rather than insist on the *certainty* of feminist politics on YouTube, we follow Hemmings in her resistance to the notion that such politics can be completely “knowable.” As Hemmings argues, “the uncertainty that characterizes feminist and queer understandings of gender, race, and sexuality in the present is easily obscured through propositions of certainty about precisely these central concerns. In imagining that we know how to ameliorate gendered, racial, and sexual inequalities, or indeed what gender, race, and sexuality *are*, it is easy to miss the profound ambivalence about these terms and the inequalities or pleasures that cluster around them” (Hemmings, intro).

We see this kind of political ambivalence in a battle with what Banet-Weiser has called an economy of visibility. Economies of visibility describe the ways in which visibility of particular identities and politics, such as gender, race and sexuality, circulate on multiple media platforms. While this visibility is important for public awareness, it also potentially becomes an end in itself, where “visibility is all there is” (Banet-Weiser, 2018). That is, through what Herman Gray has called a “politics of recognition,” to be recognized in a media economy becomes a kind of politics. This kind of recognition typically defies a reading of political ambivalence; the image or visibility of politics is the beginning and the end of those politics. Yet these analytics are interrelated; as Hemmings points out, a political ambivalence “runs counter to a rights-based approach that characterizes the twentieth century as one of increased recognition (or a lament about lack of recognition, or misrecognition), focusing attention instead on what is lost through a politics of certainty”. While recognizing that there are blurred boundaries between political ambivalence and economies of visibility, we nonetheless analyze feminist YouTubers within this typology, finding that while there are some similar messages across different feminist YouTube channels, there are also those that are seeking increased recognition and visibility within a capitalist framework, and some who are better characterized as politically ambivalent, more complex and contradictory. Following Hemmings, we seek to “foreground the importance of current complexity, despite our desire to have resolved both past and present paradoxes.” We hope to tease out the tensions, identifications and disidentifications within the analytics of political ambivalence and economies of visibility by investigating some contemporary creators on YouTube as they navigate two intersecting approaches to feminist content creation: 1) *transactional*: working within a popular feminist economy of visibility concurrent with capitalist logics, and 2) *transformational*: the ambivalent process of attaining visibility within YouTube’s attention economy as a route to radical social change.

Content creation as transactional

In a short period of time, being a ‘YouTube star’ has become a career aspiration, especially for young people. Unrealistic expectations about making money sustain this aspiration of YouTube stardom; in reality, according to Bloomberg, 97% of all aspiring YouTubers probably won’t make it above the US poverty line, which is about \$12K a year, and only 3% actually make a living wage. YouTube is fundamentally structured by an attention economy, wherein the careers of content creators across every genre live and die by the same set of metrics: views, watch time, subscribers and likes. There are many ways in which content creators make money, and the received wisdom in the online video community is that a diversity of revenue streams is essential for success, due to the unpredictability of the industry as a whole. A combination of AdSense revenue, brand collaborations, selling merchandise or books, live shows and appearances, crowdfunding on Patreon and spreading earnings across different platforms are all part of a well-rounded income. YouTube is a highly transactional platform, and content creators are required to cultivate appealing (that is, normalized) self-brands, loyal audiences, and popular content, all whilst keeping up with the frenetic pace of content output favored by YouTube’s infamous algorithm. Burnout has been one of the most discussed issues in the YouTube creator community over the past year, a reflection of their precarious and stressful working conditions on a wildly overcrowded platform with opaque systems for both the recommendation and demonetization of videos (Stokel-Walker 2018).

The creators we position within this transactional framework are those that circulate on an economy of visibility; they merge “safe” feminist politics with corporate sponsorship, and they build their own brand through supporting corporate brands. In essence, YouTube content creators are jack of all trades entrepreneurs within a highly competitive industry, simultaneously videographers, editors, on-screen talent, brand ambassadors, merchandise producers, marketers, PR reps, and they must find ways to monetize their content if they wish to sustain careers in SME. In other words, the transactional element of content creators is not only about actual cash; it is also about building a flexible self-brand, one that might find traction in the broader social media network. The *self* here is not seen as a stable entity rooted in some kind of essentialist human nature or psychoanalytic conception of unconscious identity formation, but rather as something produced by dominant cultural narratives “intent on constant innovation and flexibility” (Hearn 2008: p. 197). Hearn argues that in recent years practices of branding have moved away from the direct marketing of particular products, to a more ambient and abstract attachment of feelings and associations to objects that may then condition consumer behaviours. A brand is no longer just a simple commodity, but rather an “entire virtual context for consumption” (Ibid: p. 199). Branding is a broad system that validates the neoliberal project:

“In a world marked by increasing flexibility and flux, branding works to fix, albeit temporarily and tentatively, cultural meaning around consumption, producing aestheticized modes of justification for life under capital.” (Ibid.)

To borrow a phrase from Andrew Wernick, YouTubers become commodity signs that “function in circulation both as... object(s)-to-be-sold and as the bearer(s) of a promotional message” (1991: p. 16). YouTubers’ incomes are diverse, based on advertising revenue calculated by viewer figures, sponsorship deals, and broader projects such as merchandise and book sales. But in order to receive any of these revenue streams, YouTubers must first sell themselves by cultivating an appealing personal brand (Glatt 2017). Every self-brand must have a narrative; as Banet-Weiser wrote in 2011 about YouTube, “The almost inevitable presence of commercial brands as structuring narratives for YouTube videos indicates that self-presentation does not imply simply *any* narrative of the self, created within an endlessly open cultural script, but one that makes sense within a cultural and economic recognizable and predetermined images, texts, beliefs, and values.” While the platform has grown tremendously since 2011, it remains true that there are thousands of YouTubers (a career that barely existed in 2011) who post content about their everyday lives, trials and tribulations, creating narratives of the self. It also remains true that most of these narratives, particularly the ones that are monetized, continue to make sense within the logics of consumer

capitalism. Brooke Erin Duffy calls this kind of economic activity *aspirational labor*, describing a context where women largely populate many of the most visible genres of social media production, when digital media in general is crucial to the heightened visibility of popular feminism (2017). As Duffy theorizes, the successes of only a very few women in digital spaces mobilizes a general ethos that “everyone” can be creative and succeed (McRobbie 2016, see also Jo Littler 2018 on the myths of meritocracy). In an article in *Millennial Money* offering advice about becoming a YouTube star, author Grant Sabatier (who describes himself as a Millennial Millionaire) encourages people to become YouTubers with the enticing promise of “getting paid to do something you love, receiving praise from millions of fans, working with a flexible schedule, and enjoying other countless perks of being a YouTube star” (2019).

An archetypal example of this transactional framework is Melanie Murphy, a 29-year-old content creator from Dublin, Ireland. She has been on YouTube for 6 years and has over 607k subscribers to her channel (as of August 2019). While Murphy doesn’t brand herself as a feminist, she (and her content) clearly fall within the popular feminist genre, in that she intersperses general life vlogging content with discussions about issues such as her bisexuality, dating life, mental health, body image and sexual health/periods. For example, her 2018 video ‘Vulva/Vagina Chat + Routine! (Periods, Shaving, Odour & More)’ begins with Murphy saying she’s doing a follow-up video from a previous one that “did really really well and you guys seemed to like it.” She then says, “and just like that last video, this one is sponsored by Always, who are the global leader in vaginal hygiene products. I’ve used Always since I was a little girl, I love the brand.” She continues by mentioning Always’ participation in the End Period Poverty campaign, and ends with an enthusiastic “I LOVE Always, and how much they protect my underpants. Cause I don’t own too many pairs of underpants.” With this beginning, Murphy accomplishes a number of things: she reassures her followers that she listens and responds to them by creating a follow-up to a popular video on her channel; she announces her sponsorship with Always, and legitimates both the brand and her own sponsorship by mentioning the company’s work in a feminist campaign; and presents herself and the video as down-to-earth, not a skill for a corporation, but just a simple woman who likes to protect her underpants. The 13-minute video is largely educational about feminine hygiene, detailing the differences between the vagina and vulva, mentioning tips for cleansing, shaving, and maintaining female genitalia. This video exemplifies the cultural norms of intimacy and authenticity that are vital aspects of the creator-audience relationship, as many scholars of YouTube have noted (Banet-Weiser 2012; Bishop 2018; Cocker and Cronin 2017; Cunningham, Craig and Silver 2016; Cunningham and Craig 2017; Jorge, Maropo and Nunes 2018; Raun 2018). Audiences are savvy about content creators being paid by brands to sell products, but even within that context transparency and authenticity are valued. As Banet-Weiser wrote in 2012, principles of contemporary branding authorize branding the self as authentic, “because self-branding is seen not as an imposition of a concept or product by corporate culture but rather as the individual taking on the project herself as a way to access her “true” self” (p. 61). YouTube creators must be careful to only engage in brand-sponsored videos that dovetail with their own self-brands, particularly in the case of politically or ethically-motivated content, so as not to undermine the trust they have cultivated with their viewers and appear “inauthentic”. It is mutually beneficial for content creators and corporate brands to do collaborations such as this. Content creators offer brands like Always greater exposure and cultural capital with younger audiences, whilst brands offer creators a certain legitimacy, as well as exciting content to film, and of course significant remuneration. For creators who are able and willing to attract brand collaborations, these sorts of campaigns tend to be far more lucrative than AdSense revenue, merch sales or crowdfunding.

Feminist content creators interpret and renegotiate YouTube’s systems and structures and come up with what de Certeau (1984) would call *tactics* to earn income in ways that preferably align with both their values and their self-brands. There is a tension here for feminist content creators between needing to either fit into the brand-friendly logics of YouTube (via lucrative brand-collaborations, sponsorships and ad-revenue) or else make money through alternative means (such as crowdfunding, merch sales or separate employment). Crucially, in this chapter we are not critiquing any individual creator, but rather

the structural factors of this industry that embraces certain people to partake in neoliberal brand culture, whilst denying this opportunity to other more marginal identities. On YouTube, brandable feminist expressions are those that connect social change with capitalism, those that are politically unthreatening to the status quo, and those that emphasize individual attributes commensurate with neoliberal self-reliance, such as confidence, gumption, and entrepreneurialism.

Whilst the competitive and hierarchical structure of YouTube's attention economy blends smoothly with neoliberal logics, and the financial incentives for fitting into brand discourses are enticing, the extent to which individual feminist content creators embrace these values varies greatly. Some resist the pressures to ally with corporate culture, or else are too radical to be accepted by it, and therefore have to earn income via other means, most often through crowdfunding and selling merchandise. With this in mind, we now move on to what we term the 'transformational' axis, a deeply ambivalent process whereby creators attain visibility within YouTube's attention economy as a route to radical social change.

Content creation as transformational

Within the general context of transactional content creation on YouTube, we can also see how some productions work to transform hegemonic power relations. Part of this transformational element involves the relative openness of the media platform; for example, media scholar Aymar Jean Christian founded a web TV platform, Open TV, to develop queer, intersectional television as a way to advance our thinking on networked representation, challenging the notion that television development must be large-scale in order to restructure representation. Platforms like Open TV, and particular subsections of YouTube, demonstrate that it is possible to successfully distribute independent media production, original series, vlogs and other formats that are created by marginalized communities, including queer, transgender, non-white and female producers. However, the notion that some YouTube content creators can work to transform hegemonic dynamics of power regarding gender, sexuality, and race does not mean an uncritical embrace of YouTube's political possibilities. Rather, we see these content creators articulating politics and positionalities that are not as easily brandable as some forms of popular feminism, whilst deploying a variety of tactics to circumvent the oppressive elements of YouTube's systems in order to be able to earn a living. Utilizing the combined analytics of political ambivalence and economies of visibility, in this section we turn our attention to the ways in which some of the YouTube creators who represent more marginal identities and radical politics on the platform are trying to cultivate their self-brands and careers under conditions of precarity.

As explored in the previous section, only certain feminist expressions and politics on YouTube are easily brandable and able to merge with market logics, whilst other more marginal identities face additional obstacles in the pursuit of a sustainable career in this industry. Nowhere is this marginalization made clearer than in the ongoing struggles that LGBTQ+ YouTube creators have had with their content being demonetized and age restricted due to not being "advertiser and family friendly", despite YouTube presenting itself as a champion of the LGBTQ+ community (see for example: Hunt 2017; Khaled 2019). At a panel called 'Not Suitable for Advertisers' at VidCon USA 2018, the world's biggest annual conference for online video, one of the authors of this chapter witnessed a discussion between creators deploring YouTube for valuing the interests of advertisers above those of its LGBTQ+ creators as a result of the infamous Adpocalypse. In 2017, in response to brands pulling their adverts from the platform due to being paired with unsavory videos, YouTube tightened the algorithmic system that identifies content deemed to be 'advertiser-friendly' leading to a huge wave of user-generated videos being demonetized and deselected for recommendation to viewers. Creators reported videos with any reference to LGBTQ+ issues being automatically demonetized and age restricted, resulting in a loss of revenue for creators and, vitally important, a loss of visibility. One creator said a friend of theirs had decided not to come out on YouTube for fear of algorithmic discrimination, particularly appalling considering that the LGBTQ+ community has

long been an integral part of YouTube culture. At this panel, creators discussed the various tactics they were employing to overcome this structural inequality and regain visibility and income. One creator said that they had started to remove any reference to LGBTQ+ issues in the tags and titles of their videos to avoid algorithmic penalization, but, as they noted, this had the adverse effect of rendering their videos unsearchable to their target audience. For a platform fundamentally structured by algorithmic recommendation systems, making particular identities invisible as a result of pressures from advertisers raises serious questions about the role of YouTube as a curator of public discourse (Gillespie 2010).

A common approach employed by marginalized creators is to minimize their reliance on YouTube's advertising and recommendation systems by cultivating alternative revenue streams via community crowdfunding (predominantly on Patreon, but also tipping apps such as PayPal, and YouTube's own 'sponsor' feature) and selling merchandise. 30-year-old American creator Natalie Wynn, also known as ContraPoints, provides a particularly interesting example. She is a trans creator who posts exquisitely produced long-form video essays on topics such as gender, philosophy, the alt-right and race, with an aim to 'counterbalance the hatred toward progressive movements that is so common online' (Wynn 2019). Wynn has been celebrated as a creator who is exceptionally good at communicating progressive politics with misogynistic and alt-right audiences (Cross 2018). As she states in her Patreon description: "Stylistically, I try to appeal to a wide audience and avoid merely preaching to the choir. I try to make the videos I'd want to watch: well-produced, informative, funny, and entertaining". She has had remarkable success on YouTube with over 690k subscribers (as of August 2019) and around 1 million views per video, despite refusing to conform to YouTube's algorithmically-encouraged cultural norm of posting a high volume of content. She only posts one video a month, a far cry from the multiple uploads a week recommended for increasing visibility, and actively chooses not to participate in brand sponsorships. As she tweeted back in November 2017: "People ask all the time whether my videos are demonetized. Yes. Pretty much all of them are, and many are also age-restricted. I don't complain about it though because I'm the queen of Patreon". As she continues in a comment, "The age restriction is more of a problem because it negatively affects view count". In response to the discrimination that Wynn faces in terms of visibility and income, as a result of her channel's radical and progressive subject matter, her business model relies instead on selling merchandise and crowdfunding on Patreon, where she has 9,400 patrons who give her monthly donations (there are tiers of \$2, \$5, £10, \$15 and \$20) in exchange for exclusive perks such as access to monthly Ask Me Anything streams and "immortality in the credits of each new video". Aside from generating revenue, the benefit of having an active Patreon community is that it divorces the creator-audience relationship from YouTube's recommendation system, which is notorious for not notifying subscribers when new content is released.

Whilst ContraPoints is an example of a radical feminist creator who has managed to cultivate a successful and relatively stable career on YouTube without completely allying with neoliberal brand culture, this is challenging to achieve and not always possible. It depends on capturing the attention of a large audience and converting this creator-audience relationship into a financial transaction whereby the audience feels moved to donate money. In other words, while these types of creators may resist some of the ad-centered business model of YouTube, they are not anti-capitalist. Indeed, there are many progressive creators who occupy a more ambivalent position, whereby they attain visibility and income in part by collaborating with corporate brands, as a route to radical social change. Kat Blaque is a Californian black trans creator who has been posting videos on YouTube for more than 10 years, and an example of one of the more radical feminist creators on the platform. She is known and loved by her community for her outspoken and "real" approach to controversial subject matter such as transphobia, misogyny, racism and sexual violence. Much like Wynn, Blaque has faced demonetization on the platform due to her content not being deemed 'advertiser-friendly' and as a result she has also attempted to gain income directly from her audience. As she reminded her followers in February 2019 via Twitter: "My last two videos were demonetized. If you support my stuff, remember you can always tip" and goes on to list her Venmo, Cashapp and PayPal profiles, as well as her Patreon page.

However, Blaque has found herself and other “LeftTube” creators (the community of left-wing YouTubers who make political commentary and philosophical content, also known as “BreadTube”) receiving critique from audiences for producing anti-capitalist content whilst also seeking remuneration via crowdfunding, selling merchandise and brand sponsorships. During the process of writing this chapter, Kat most fortuitously posted a 24-minute video as part of her weekly *True Tea* series, titled ‘Why is Left Tube So Sponsored? | Kat Blaque’ (Blaque 2019), in which she responds to these critiques. In her usual style of transparency, she explains that it is expensive and precarious to work full-time as a YouTube content creator, and that she is barely earning enough to pay rent and buy food for herself. “I don’t think that it’s fair to chastise people living under and capitalistic system for using capitalism to survive” she argues, “I’m an artist... if you like what I do, you support what I do, then you shouldn’t shame me for wanting to make it”. She concedes that there are valid arguments to be made, particularly when it comes to sponsorships, but that creators do not always have the luxury of choice:

“I’m going to try to do some sponsorships that are always in line with my morals, but maybe I’m not going to be able to have that decision. This is the unfortunate reality of being a creator, right? This is how we make our income, this is how we make our living, by allowing people to sell things on our content. I would love to do that in a way that feels very seamless, in a way that seems very natural. I want to be sponsored by things that I do believe in. I don’t want to sell you bullshit, I really, truly don’t. [But] I’m not going to prevent myself from making a smart business decision that’s going to ultimately feed me and keep me doing this.”

In the description below the video are her usual links to three different tipping platforms, Venmo, Cashapp and PayPal, as well as her Patreon page and merch store, and information for how to hire her as a public speaker.

We understand creators like Kat Blaque and Ash Hardell, a popular non-binary creator who makes educational content about trans issues, sexuality and mental health and who regularly engages in brand sponsorships (recent collaborations include Adam and Eve’s gender non-conforming lingerie, Dollar Shave Club and Verizon in conjunction with LGBTQ+ nonprofit PFLAG), as occupying deeply ambivalent, and at times contradictory, political positionalities within YouTube’s economy of visibility. These creators are seeking recognition within a capitalist framework, whilst also using this platform to promote progressive, intersectional and queer politics. As we have explored, this is in large part a problem of structural inequality, whereby creators are marginalized and forced to overcome algorithmic invisibility and demonetization as a result of their radical content and positionalities.

The Limits of YouTube

In her video titled ‘Do I Have Privilege?’, queer feminist creator and LGBTQ+ advocate Rowan Ellis breaks down the concepts of privilege and intersectionality (Ellis 2018). She explains that whilst she is marginalized as a queer woman, she is still the benefactor of white, able-bodied, middle class privilege. The concepts of privilege and intersectionality are foundational to the argument we have presented in this chapter. Those who slot easily into popular feminist ‘brand-safe’ discourses, namely white, heterosexual, cis-gendered and middle-class women, face significantly less adversity in their plight to build sustainable careers as content creators. Those who represent more radical positions and marginal identities, particularly creators who inhabit multiple intersections of marginality such as Kat Blaque, face far greater barriers to earning a living and achieving visibility in the social media entertainment industry. The work of feminist content creators on YouTube is complex, requiring the navigation of often contradictory pressures. Our point in analyzing these videos as “transactional” or “transformational” is not to say that there are defined borders that separate these two aspirations, but rather to say that it

makes more sense to think about the feminist politics of YouTube creators within a framework of political ambivalence. To return to Hemmings, approaching identities such as gender, race, and sexuality as “knowable” denies the ways that all identities are always problematic and pleasurable, often at the same time. All of the feminist content creators mentioned in this chapter aspire to be transactional, if not to actually make a living, then to build a self-brand. YouTube’s algorithm is designed to render some content more visible than others, and the logic of this asymmetry is based on profitability. In line with this logic, videos that are “brand safe” and have pre-roll adverts on them get offered up to a wider audience than those that do not. In this way, content creators are not only steered towards making content that is aligned with corporate culture in order to earn AdSense revenue, but also to be promoted algorithmically, in other words, to be seen. We started this chapter by asking to what extent are professional YouTube content creators able to present more radical versions of feminism, or else pushed to fit into neoliberal brand culture in order to gain visibility and income? The answer we have arrived at is, as promised, deeply ambivalent. Whilst we have seen the emergence of exciting queer, intersectional and progressive political content on YouTube working to transform hegemonic power relations, this content is fundamentally built upon a platform designed with the capitalist logics of competition, hierarchy and inequality. So, while some content creators aspire to be “transformational” – to change social norms, to challenge discrimination, to disrupt systems of power – as long as this kind of transformation is also transactional, there is a limit to its progressive potential.

References

Banet-Weiser, S. (2011). 'Branding the Post-Feminist Self: Girls' Video Production on YouTube' in Kearney, M. C. (ed.) *Mediated girlhoods: new explorations of girls' media culture*. New York, USA: Peter Lang, pp. 277-294.

_____(2012). *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York, USA: New York University Press.

_____(2018). *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham, USA: Duke University Press.

Bishop, S. (2018). 'Anxiety, panic and self-optimisation: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm'. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 24:1, pp. 69-84.

Blaque, K. (2019). 'Why is Left Tube So Sponsored? | Kat Blaque' *YouTube* (Kat Blaque), 31st July. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rjao8RY8Sk>

Burgess, J. and Green, J. (2018). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Cocker, H. and Cronin, J. (2017) 'Charismatic authority and the YouTuber: Unpacking the new cults of personality'. *Marketing Theory 'OnlineFirst'*. Published on: 2nd February 2017. Retrieved from: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1470593117692022>

Collins, J. (2019). 'The Top 10 Most Popular Sites of 2019' [online]. *Lifewire*, 24th June. Retrieved from: <https://www.lifewire.com/most-popular-sites-3483140>

Cross, K. (2018). 'THE OSCAR WILDE OF YOUTUBE FIGHTS THE ALT-RIGHT WITH DECADENCE AND SEDUCTION' [online]. *The Verge*, 24th August. Retrieved from: <https://www.theverge.com/tech/2018/8/24/17689090/contrapoints-youtube-natalie-wynn>

Cunningham, S., Silver J. and Craig D. (2016). 'YouTube, multichannel networks and the accelerated evolution of the new screen ecology'. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 22:4, pp. 376-391.

Cunningham, S. and Craig, D. (2017). 'Being 'really real' on YouTube: authenticity, community and brand culture in social media entertainment'. *Media International Australia*. 164(1), pp. 71-81.

_____(2019). *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York: New York University Press.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley, USA: University of California Press.

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ellis, R. (2018). 'Do I Have Privilege?' *YouTube*, 21st January. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZPK57Qv7j0>

Gillespie, T. (2010). 'The politics of 'platforms'', *New Media & Society*, 12:3, pp. 347-364.

Glatt, Z. (2017). 'The Commodification of YouTube Vloggers' *Dissertation for MA Digital Media, Goldsmiths, University of London*. Available at: https://zoeglatt.com/?page_id=26

Hearn, A. (2008). 'Meat, mask, burden': Probing the contours of the branded 'self.' *Journal of Consumer Culture*. 8, 2, pp. 197–217.

Hemmings, C. (2018). *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist political ambivalence and the imaginative archive*. London, UK: Duke University Press.

Hunt, E. (2017). 'LGBT community anger over YouTube restrictions which make their videos invisible' [online]. *The Guardian*, 20th March. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/20/lgbt-community-anger-over-youtube-restrictions-which-make-their-videos-invisible>

Jorge, A., Maropo, L. and Nunes, T. (2018). 'I am not being sponsored to say this': A teen youtuber and her audience negotiate branded content'. *Observatorio*. 2018, 76-96.

Khaled, A. (2019). 'A History of YouTube Undermining Its LGBT+ Creators' [online]. *The Startup, Medium*, 5th June. Retrieved from: <https://medium.com/swlh/youtube-lgbt-demonetization-db22f5c978f9>

Littler, J. (2018). *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and the Myths of Mobility*. New York, USA: Routledge.

McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: making a living in the new culture industries*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Murphy, M. (2018). 'Vulva/Vagina Chat + Routine! (Periods, Shaving, Odour & More) | ad' *YouTube* (Melanie Murphy), 13th October. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQ9AC-NX0GA&t=38s>

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York, USA: NYU Press.

Raun, T. (2018). 'Capitalizing intimacy New subcultural forms of micro-celebrity strategies and affective labour on YouTube'. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 24, 99-113.

Rottenberg, C. (2018). *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.

Sabatier, G. (2019). 'HOW MUCH DO YOUTUBERS MAKE? (A LOT!)' [online]. *Millennial Money*, 10th July. Retrieved from: <https://millennialmoney.com/how-much-do-youtubers-make/>

Stokel-Walker, C. (2018). 'Why YouTubers are feeling the burn' [online]. *The Guardian*, 12th August. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/12/YouTubers-feeling-burn-video-stars-crumbling-under-pressure-of-producing-new-content>

Tufekci, Z. (2013). "Not this one": Social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(7), 848-870.

Wernick, A. (1991). *Promotional Culture*. London, UK: Sage.

Wynn, N. (2019). *ContraPoints Patreon page*. Retrieved from: <https://www.patreon.com/contrapoints/overview>

YouTube. (2019). 'YouTube for Press' [online]. *YouTube website*, 13th August. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/yt/about/press/>