“Running the Numbers”: Modes of Microcelebrity Labor in Queer Women’s Self-Representation on Instagram and Vine

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Abstract

Microcelebrity, as a set of practices contributing to personalized self-branding, has become an increasingly prominent component of self-representation on social media platforms. While “influencers” who have built lucrative followings through microcelebrity give the appearance of having fun without much exertion, recent studies have uncovered multiple forms of labor involved in their practices of cultural production. In addition, scholars analyzing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) influencers highlight a tension between labor in service of self-commodification and the representation of sexual minorities. This article examines the microcelebrity labor of everyday queer women who aim to increase their social and economic capital by interweaving personal self-representations with entrepreneurial endeavors on Instagram and Vine. Through a close analysis of these platforms’ markets, governance, and infrastructures alongside interviews with queer female users of each platform, attention is given to both platform influences and participants’ experiences of promoting their jobs, side-gigs, hobbies, or passions alongside the rest of their lives. Findings identify three modes of labor specific to participants’ efforts to build a following: (1) intimate affective labor expended in sharing and managing personal disclosures; (2) developmental aesthetic labor as the acquisition and practice of technical skills and bodily displays to achieve a desired appearance or performance; (3) aspiring relational labor in attempts to forge relationships with established influencers or celebrities. Sexual identity was pivotal across these modes of labor, as it enhanced intimacy with followers, provided a niche audience for self-branding, conveyed authenticity through self-revelation, and established a common ground for forging relationships.

Keywords

social media, platforms, platformization, microcelebrity, queer, lesbian, LGBTQ, self-representation, labor, influencers

The Vine famous people . . . they are able to run a lot of numbers, and then they get seen by other people and they—a lot of opportunities are presented to them . . . So, if you have a goal and stick to it, you can really get somewhere far in the industry. (Chrissy)

Vine may be dead but its legacy continues. Despite the decommissioning of Twitter’s 6.5-s looping video platform in early 2017, Chrissy’s observation rings true for a select few “Vine famous people” who have continued to gain notoriety on other platforms. For example, Logan Paul, who is known for his prank videos, brought his Vine followers to YouTube where he expanded his fandom to 18 million subscribers' even in light of his controversial content, discussed by Caplan and Gillespie (Forthcoming). Given the multitude of Vines that have now been long forgotten, Logan Paul is certainly an outlier. However, Chrissy had the sense that Vine provided the means for people to “blow up really quick” in popularity, which held the potential of social and economic success. This spurred her to create videos in between being a wife, mom, teaching assistant, and creating paintings and artistic jewelry. Her videos shared about her life and artwork in hopes that they would generate mutually reinforcing returns in terms of social attention and sales.

Chrissy’s relationship to social media, as an everyday user who also pursued potential gains, was common among Concordia University, Canada

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the queer women who I interviewed about their use of Instagram and Vine. As part of a broader study of queer women’s digital self-representation, I anticipated that sexual identity would be meaningful for participants’ self-representation and that this would be reflected in their photos and videos (see Duguay, 2018). However, I was surprised when participants’ self-representations were closely coupled with aims to gain followers who would bolster their social attention, potentially leading to positive economic outcomes. These outcomes could take the form of product sales, an increase in clients, or larger audiences for participants who were performers. Several participants also hoped that their social media following could be monetized in ways similar to those outliers who garner social media fame. Senft (2013) has described microcelebrity as an approach to online behavior, constituted by “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same” (p. 346). Microcelebrity has become an increasingly prominent component of self-representation within precarious economic conditions that reward individual entrepreneurship. While self-branding is now an everyday practice, many studies of the labor through which it is executed on platforms have examined individuals with established followings (Abidin, 2016; Cunningham & Craig, 2017). Furthermore, scholars are only starting to make sense of how the intimacy necessary to connect with a following can be paired with self-commodification for potential economic gains (Baym, 2018; Raun, 2018). In terms of branding, sexuality and sexual identity have long been incorporated into marketing to sell a range of products and lifestyles (Sender, 2003). But their commodification also threatens to dilute the political efficacy of identities and messages that run counter to heteronormative (and gender normative) ideologies entrenched in neoliberal markets (Lovelock, 2017). These factors are at play in queer women’s attempts to connect with followers in ways that mix broader social and economic aims.

Through a close analysis of the markets, governance, and infrastructures (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) of Instagram and Vine along with in-depth interviews with queer female users of these platforms, this article examines how these women negotiate such arrangements. At the time of these interviews, participants had relatively small followings but many were exerting effort toward growing them. This forward-looking stance reflects Duffy’s (2016) concept of “aspirational labour,” comprising intentions toward establishing a social media following that can be subsequently upkept through sustained and lucrative “relational labour” (Baym, 2018). In the service of establishing and expanding their followings, participants exerted three notable modes of labor that I categorize as intimate affective, developmental aesthetic, and aspiring relational. While these modes of labor relate to microcelebrity practices, they specifically pertain to everyday users who are becoming self-made cultural producers. Participants’ cultural production on social media was tangential to their main economic pursuits (their “day jobs”) but still constituted steps toward the realization of social and economic goals. Sexual identity plays a pivotal role in this labor, as it enhances intimacy with followers, provides a niche audience for self-branding, conveys authenticity through self-revelation, and establishes a common ground for attempting to forge relationships with users who have larger followings. Participants’ experiences of including sexual identity in their self-representations and navigating a range of platform and user responses indicate that their social media use may hold a dual capacity to challenge heteronormativity while facilitating greater access to social and economic capital.

**Microcelebrity and Platformed (Self-) Production**

Senft (2008) first developed the concept of “microcelebrity” in her study of camgirls, who formed personal connections with audiences instead of maintaining the conventional separation between celebrity and audience. This interpersonal mode of relating to a niche audience constitutes the core of microcelebrity practice (Senft, 2013). In contemporary neoliberal economies, where work has become more precarious and individuals are evaluated as entrepreneurial subjects, there is increasing pressure to self-promote and build a unique personal brand (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). This self-branding occurs through social media, where microcelebrity serves as “a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others, use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans” (Marwick, 2016, p. 333). Thus, microcelebrity is “something one does, rather than something one is” (Marwick, 2016, p. 337). Individuals who engage in microcelebrity practices and build a lucrative following are commonly referred to as “influencers,” as seemingly ordinary individuals who develop a career through digitally narrating their lives and monetizing their efforts (Abidin, 2016). Platforms provide the context for microcelebrity practices as they have become increasingly professionalized (see Cunningham and Craig, this collection).

With the “platformization” of the web, platforms have extended their influence through social plug-ins that require programmers to make their outputs “platform ready” (Helmond, 2015). Similarly, everyday content producers must also become platform ready. Building on the concept of platformization, Nieborg and Poell (2018) point out three elements of platforms—markets, governance, and infrastructures—that affect the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content. Platforms rely upon multi-sided markets whereby multiple actors are involved in processes of production and consumption (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4). Platforms often offer services free to users, who constitute one side of the market, by incorporating user data into ad sales on another side. Users’ microcelebrity practices also
intersect with platforms’ multi-sided markets: influencers serve as consumers and producers of platform content while also sometimes bolstering ad revenue or mediating between platforms and brands as brand ambassadors. Multi-channel networks (MCNs)—companies designed to build one’s social media brand—function as intermediaries between platforms and influencers (Cunningham et al., 2016). As Bishop (this collection) illustrates, self-designated algorithmic “experts” sometimes play a role similar to MCNs, capitalizing on creators’ frustration with ranking algorithms while proclaiming to possess the keys to platform visibility. These arrangements of corporate platforms, self-promoting users, and other actors unveil the multi-sided markets at play.

Through governance structures, “platforms [exercise] significant political economic and infrastructural control” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 7) over content producers. Platform policies outline what must be excluded from self-representations, such as prohibited forms of nudity and violence, and what must be included—for example—indicators of when a post is sponsored. Governance measures are often carried out through opaque processes that fail to protect against (and may even enable) the targeting, harassment, and marginalization of women and people of color (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Olszanowski, 2014). Programmed enforcement of governance policies belies one of many ways that platform infrastructures shape cultural content. Cultural producers must adapt to infrastructures that support “an iterative, data-driven process in which content is constantly altered to optimize for platform distribution and monetization” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 13). Microcelebrity practices are clearly enmeshed with and produced through negotiations with platform elements, and these practices can cumulatively be understood as modes of labor.

**Tensions of Labor and Self-Representation**

Labor can be understood as the as “exertion of the body or mind . . . usually used to describe activities that have some sort of compulsion attached to them” (Hesmondhalgh, 2010, p. 276). Individuals who desire to create a following on social media are often compelled to accumulate social and economic capital. This exertion, carried out by those who are not yet of influencer status, reflects Duffy’s (2016) concept of “aspirational labour,” as a “forward-looking and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity” (p. 443). In her interviews with cultural producers of social media content relating to fashion, beauty, style or retail, she found three features of aspirational labor: (1) performances of authenticity, involving a celebration of “realness” that masked existing educational and socioeconomic status; (2) an instrumental approach to affective relationships, performing emotional labor in the networking and upkeep of relationships with audiences; and (3) entrepreneurial brand devotion as a passionate alignment of one’s self-brand with commodity goods. These aspects of aspirational labor serve as stepping stones toward acquiring more followers and augmenting engagement metrics, holding the potential of compensation for brand deals or a break-through to more stable, traditional media production.

Labor does not, however, cease once one has established a large following. Baym (2018) observes that as musicians have become their own promoters and marketers in the era of social media, they enact “relational labour” as “the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work” (p. 19). While musicians were affected early on by digital media’s reconfiguration of audiences, today’s entrepreneurial and “gig economy” workers are also expected to engage in relational labor. Baym (2018) discusses the need for individuals to develop their skills, social capital, and knowledge—in relation to one’s field of work as well as platforms and metrics—to aptly conduct relational labor. Therefore, it is possible to comprehend aspirational labor as the precursor to more professionalized relational labor, serving as a training process for managing an ongoing and eventually (hopefully) lucrative audience.

The self-commodification and commercialized aims of aspirational labor pose complications for the representation of non-heterosexual identities. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals have long fought for representation in public spheres. As earlier decades have given way to the inclusion of LGBTQ characters and personalities across broadcast media, these representations still often include stereotypes, marginal roles, or the intense pairing of homosexuality with lavish lifestyles to appeal to heterosexual audiences (Ng, 2013). The Internet and social media have enabled LGBTQ people to more easily produce and circulate a diversity of self-representations (Gray, 2009). Although platforms pose challenges, such as privacy risks (Cho, 2017), the circulation of LGBTQ self-representations on social media can contribute to individuals’ sexual identity development, community-building, and challenges to heteronormative discourses (Cooper & Dzara, 2010). For example, Herrera (2017) found that queer women’s self-representations on Instagram that were paired with lesbian-related hashtags enabled individuals to claim an “intelligible sexual identity” (p. 11) while feeling like part of a community. However, the commercialization of, and marketing toward, minority sexual identities can dilute counterpublic discourse and meaningful community formation (Campbell, 2005; Lovelock, 2017). LGBTQ audiences may perceive the self-commodification of queer influencers, who represent their sexual and gender identity in ways that intertwine with product placements and self-promotion, as ceasing to uphold the interests of the sexual minority (Raun, 2018). Despite this, Raun (2018) posits that intensely personal displays of intimacy may enable a negotiation of the politics of representation alongside the commercialization of one’s following. These observations raise questions about how queer
women enacting modes of aspirational labor manage the inclusion of sexual identity in their self-representations.

Investigating Queer Women’s Social Media

This article is based on findings from a 3-year study of queer women’s self-representation on social media. It draws on a close analysis of Instagram and Vine as well as interviews with queer, female users of these platforms to investigate both platform influence and user experiences involved in cultural self-production. To examine the influence of platform markets, governance, and infrastructures, I followed the “walkthrough method” (Light et al., 2018). This approach comprises two stages: first, a platform’s environment of expected use is established through an exploration of promotional materials, policies, and ancillary media that indicate the platform’s vision, governance structure, and operating model. For both Instagram and Vine, I collected platform materials (e.g., blog posts, terms of service) from their initial launch until the end of data collection in mid-2016. I combined these materials with media articles about the platforms, app store descriptions, and social media discussions. Second, this method involves a technical walkthrough as a step-by-step analysis of each platform’s screens, features, functions, text, and symbolic representations to understand how the infrastructure guides users and supports the platform’s vision, governance, and market aims. I conducted technical walkthroughs of Instagram and Vine in 2015, using the iPhone version of each app and recording detailed field notes. When major updates occurred, I carried out further technical walkthroughs focused on examining new features or functions. The walkthroughs allowed for platform-specific influences to be identified and these appear throughout the findings, demonstrating how different platform elements shape modes of labor.

Interview participants were sampled through direct messages on each platform, which I sent to users who produced self-representational content tagged with hashtags popular among queer women (e.g., #lezzigram on Instagram, #RainbowGang on Vine). However, not all users check their messages and platforms’ inbox features often filter messages from unknown individuals. Six women responded through Instagram and I recruited another two Instagrammers through my own social media networks and those of LGBTQ organizations. On Vine, two women responded to interview requests, as the platform was already decreasing in popularity at this time. Across these 10 interviews, participants ranged in age (18–46), gender expression (variously identifying as masculine, femme, androgynous and genderfluid), ethnicity, and occupation, though many worked in service industries. Since participants were in various locations, including Australia, Canada, Thailand, and the United States, I conducted interviews by telephone and Skype, with each interview lasting between 60 and 90 min. I iteratively coded the interviews, applying descriptive, topical, and analytic codes (Morse & Richards, 2002). Some participants chose the names by which they would like to be referenced while others chose to use pseudonyms to protect their privacy. While this is a small sample, these in-depth interviews provided thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of participants’ self-representational practices, which were paired with walkthrough findings to understand platform and user dimensions of participants’ microcelebrity-related labor.

Findings and Discussion

While participants ranged in their number of followers, none had established social media production as their main lucrative endeavor or had gained the followings required for influencer status. The closest was the Viner Jaxx, whose comedic skits put her around 22,600 followers, and second to this was Chrissy, who had around 13,700 followers owing to her popularity among African American Viners. While these numbers are high, they are far from the millions of followers necessary at the time to land users on “top Viner” lists and potentially garner brand partnerships (Bambenek, 2016). In contrast, niche advertising deals on Instagram were rumored to start in the range of 5,000 to 10,000 followers (Ma, 2015). Alex, who was a barista and designed clothing on the side, cultivated an Instagram following of more than 9,000 for an account showcasing androgyous fashion, which also enabled her to sell the clothes she created. While Kelzz had more than 5,000 Instagram followers watching her short dance clips, she was still trying to grow her fanbase before quitting her day job at a warehouse and heading on tour. A couple, Queenie and Emi, mobilized Instagram to promote themselves as performers of burlesque and drag, respectively. However, Emi’s account, mainly dedicated to her employment as a tattoo artist, had a smaller following around 1,400 in comparison with Queenie’s heavily burlesque-themed account with about 4,000 followers. As an activist for transgender rights, Mïta had just over 800 Instagram followers while Kamla, a motivational speaker, was growing her following of 400. Julie, a children’s program facilitator, had deliberated between public and private accounts in the past but had recently started growing her public account with around 200 followers. With 150 followers, Thea was increasing her Instagram use in order to make more social connections as a graduate student. Early during interviews, it was apparent that participants were reflective about their follower counts and the majority were in the process of employing strategies to grow them.

Participants’ social media accounts were clearly related to their social and economic endeavors, which often overlapped. They posted about their lives as well as their jobs, hobbies, or side-gigs, for which they were often attempting to expand compensation or monetization in the first place. In this way, participants’ social media activity constituted aspirational labor, aiming to accrue social and economic capital through self-representational styles and techniques. However,
invited audiences into the intimacy of their family life. Mïta photos and videos of her wife and baby. Her images, ase-
day, personal aspects of life with her wife and daughters. (Smith & Tyler, 2017), Chrissy’s Vine account showed every-
ning habits that she assumed others would recognize in their
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popular genre of humor, this meant posting videos that fea-
because it has nothing to do with them.” Within Vine’s
or personal forms of exchange that are often marginalized,
rendered invisible, or punished in heteronormative spaces.
Simultaneously, the inclusion of subtle sexual content as “sex bait,” a sensual equivalent to clickbait, is a common
microcelebrity approach for enticing and sustaining audi-
ences (Abidin & Cover, 2019). Overtly flirtatious and sexu-
ally themed posts allowed participants to rapidly accrue
attention and form a sense of closeness with their followers.

Intimate Affective Labor

Participants’ self-representations often included intimate con-
tent relating to their sexual identity in ways that framed it as part of their everyday lives. Chrsissy’s Vines included clips of her life as a married lesbian mom, which she described as “relatable”: “If things are not relatable and you’re like, very vain about what you’re posting, people are not going to really care because it has nothing to do with them.” Within Vine’s popular genre of humor, this meant posting videos that fea-
tured her wife and included jokes about annoying but endear-
ings habits that she assumed others would recognize in their
own relationships. Whereas television shows still often include one-dimensional and normative lesbian storylines (Smith & Tyler, 2017), Chrsissy’s Vine account showed every-
day, personal aspects of life with her wife and daughters.

On Instagram, Mïta took a similar approach of posting photos and videos of her wife and baby. Her images, aes-
ethically tailored for Instagram’s focus on beautiful visuals, invited audiences into the intimacy of their family life. Mïta
aimed to demonstrate that transwomen can be mothers and “that there’s more than just [a] father and mother out there that can have a family.” She engaged audience interaction through photos of her son playing outdoors and observed, “He gets more comments than I do!” Including Instagram audiences in close family moments, curated and rendered aesthetically appealing through Instagram’s editing features, ties into Raun’s (2018) observation that intimacy can func-
tion as a genre. He suggests that the genre of intimacy exuded through microcelebrity involves not only one’s performance and content but also the audience’s expectation of intimacy, similar to that of a close friendship. Mïta’s display of inti-
mate family life set the foundation for this close relationship with her audience, as she imagined her self-representations resonating with others searching for the validation that trans-
gender parents can exist and thrive.

Some participants also generated intimacy through flirty and sexual content. Instagrammers Kelzz and Alex created posts they hoped would be attractive to other queer women, striking poses and sometimes including suggestive captions. Alex imagined her images were for “the cute girl I’m talking to [over Instagram], which isn’t always the same cute girl but whatever one at the time.” While Chrsissy did not flirt, she initiated group conversations about sexual topics with other lesbian Viners, who frequently posted sensual dance videos for each other. Orne (2017) argues that interactions among queer people can give rise to “sexy community” (p. 41) when they include what he calls “naked intimacy”—sexual and personal forms of exchange that are often marginalized, rendered invisible, or punished in heteronormative spaces. Simultaneously, the inclusion of subtle sexual content as “sex bait,” a sensual equivalent to clickbait, is a common
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In addition to intimacy being a genre of microcelebrity, Raun (2018) also argues that it functions as a form of capital. Participants’ affectively intimate displays alongside recognizable identifiers, such as identity-related hashtags (e.g., #lesbi-
ansofinstagram), also constructed audiences as niche markets.
By creating a side account dedicated to re-posting users’ pho-
tos of themselves in androgynous clothing, Alex gathered an audience of potential buyers for her fashion items. Emi switched from Facebook to Instagram because she suspected that Facebook had begun hiding her tattoo content in her fol-
lowers’ Newsfeeds. Subsequently, she gained followers who were interested in tattoos but she also found that posting her tattoos alongside pictures with her girlfriend could weed out homophobic potential clients. On Vine, Jaxx fostered atten-
tion from overlapping audiences for her comedic skits about being a person who identifies as bisexual, Latina, and neuro-
divergent. Her skits received enough views that a representa-
tive from Twitter (Vine’s parent company) contacted Jaxx to say, “The company’s aware of who you are” and that Vine
was interested in promoting her content if she continued to grow her following. However, this placed an additional burden on her creative production: “I'm now starting to feel the stress in a network that I found as a hobby, you know.” She found it challenging to craft videos that would simultaneously appeal to broader audiences and her existing niche communities, which formed around shared markers of identity.

Producing affectively intimate content also carried the risk of unwanted attention from homophobic users while participants negotiated platform governance mechanisms. Chrissy referred to the high volume of racist and homophobic comments on her Vines collectively as “the hate.” Similarly, Jaxx lamented the predictable wave of “fuckboys”—generally, heterosexual white men with a misogynistic sense of humor—who made discriminatory comments when her Vines featured prominently on the Comedy channel. Both women noted that the affective labor of constantly deleting comments alongside blocking and reporting users caused them to consider switching to other platforms with more privacy features. Vine’s lenient community guidelines simultaneously allowed for the expression of sexual identity through videos with more sexual content but failed to protect queer women from harassment or unwanted dick pic-like videos in their direct messages. In contrast, Instagram’s strict prohibition against nudity and user reporting mechanisms led to a photo of underwear models on Alex’s account being flagged. Although the photo did not violate Instagram’s terms of service, she decided to remove it rather than risk account deletion losing her following. Platforms’ governance policies and infrastructural features shaped the degree of intimacy participants could include in their self-representations as well as their recourse to unwanted sexual, misogynistic, or homophobic responses from others.4

These examples reflect the different dimensions of and influences upon participants’ intimate affective labor. Since microcelebrity demands the upkeep of relationships with niche audiences (Marwick, 2016; Senft, 2008), affect is key to this. Participants’ inclusion of intimate content relating to sexual identity served as a way to generate this affect, grabbing niche audiences’ attention through a shared, personal element of identity. Intimate affective labor aimed to tap into audiences’ assumed (and confirmed through metrics) desire to encounter others like them who were participating in everyday life, being in relationships, and expressing sexuality. Raun (2018) notes that the microcelebrity “genre of intimacy” includes a “negotiation of technological affordances, cultural norms and regulation” (p. 105). This was true for participants, as they navigated platform infrastructures and governance mechanisms while engaging in the normative sharing of personal content in which intimacy was accentuated through displays of sexual identity.

**Developmental Aesthetic Labor**

Participants were often preoccupied with developmental aesthetic labor, as a process of acquiring and developing technical skills as well as bodily presentation strategies associated with microcelebrity, through which they aimed to display a desired appearance and recognizable brand. Several participants’ stylistic techniques were self-taught. Julie conducted “marketing research, like how to use Instagram for your business,” which helped her to develop technical skills: “I can make any photo Instagram-worthy . . . I really have wicked skills with those little tools. If it's a flattering picture, I’m like, ‘Oh, I look good in this picture, let’s bring it—I can tweak this picture.’” Technical expertise on Instagram involved the mastery of filters, third-party editing apps, and skillful application of relevant hashtags. Emi received social media training from the manager of her tattoo shop:

She literally made us a list of, like, “These are the hashtags you should use for your tattoos here,” and I literally copy and paste almost the same hashtags into every single photo that I do for tattoos and then I’ll add a few.

With Instagram’s filters and editing tools supporting a focus on glamorous visual displays (Marwick, 2015), participants made it a priority to become educated on editing and circulating their images to networks among which they would have the most appeal. In contrast, Vine encouraged spontaneous sharing through a dearth of editing tools and the quick “tap to record” feature that enabled recording simply by holding one’s finger against the screen. This challenged Chrissy and her fellow Viners to find a third-party app for adding music to their videos, which enhanced their affective intimate content. They learned to use the app so seamlessly that she viewed Vine’s update with a similar feature as redundant: “We’ve been adding music to our stuff for so long, we don’t even really need [the update] anymore. [Vine] took forever to get on our level when we’ve been doing it, so it doesn’t even matter.” Through the labor of identifying and mastering this additional tool, Chrissy supplemented Vine’s infrastructure.

Contrary to Instagram’s emphasis on visuals, Jaxx expressed less pressure to focus on her appearance in her Vines:

I look back [and] I’m like, “Damn, I probably should have fixed my eyeliner. I probably should have worn a t-shirt.” But I think part of my Vines are also the fact that I don’t care . . . I’ve had people tell me like, “Yo, your confidence and the fact that you really don’t care has helped me to do that.” So, should I think about how I set up my Vines? Probably. Do I? No. I mean, sometimes it’s because, again, a lot of my inspiration is improv because that’s what I was taught back at theatre school . . . It’s off the top of your head.

Her ambivalence paired with a casual mention of past education as an entertainer reflect microcelebrity performances of authenticity that often downplay the specialized training and resources necessary to achieve a particular self-representation (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Her developmental aesthetic labor was reflected in the training and practice
required to execute improvisational comedy, which featured as a popular genre on Vine.

At times, the developmental status of participants’ aesthetic labor was evident. Kelzz had trouble with Instagram’s pre-set photo shapes and sizes, “I still get cut off sometimes with some of my pictures . . . so, it works but doesn’t work.” Julie struggled to find hashtags that were relevant to her work and in popular use: “Nobody has said to me, ‘Hey, I was searching for kids’ programs and I came across you.’” Similarly, Jaxx attempted to learn how to promote her Vines more widely across Twitter at the representative’s behest, but she encountered challenges due to her unfamiliarity with the platform: “I was like, ‘I know to you I’m a child but I graduated high school right as Twitter became a thing, so I don’t get Twitter.’” Abidin (2016) identifies that behind influencers’ content lies tacit labor as “a collective practice of work that is understated and under-vilified from being so thoroughly rehearsed that it appears effortless and subconscious” (p. 10). Tacit labor includes the development of technical skills, such as how to edit photos, as well as bodily labor related to poses and self-expression, all of which contributes to the aesthetics of the self-representation being produced. Therefore, within participants’ aspirational stance, their developmental aesthetic labor aimed to eventually render this exertion invisible.

Several participants carried out bodily labor or aesthetic displays that incorporated indicators of sexual identity. Queenie observed, “When I get [my hair] re-dyed, it’s like super bright rainbow, so I’ll get a lot of likes for specific hair-styles or hair colour or make-up.” Images displaying her rainbow hair appealed not only to Instagram’s large fashion and beauty communities but also attracted followers through the rainbow as a symbol of LGBTQ sexuality. Jaxx often featured a rainbow flag in her videos, which heightened the comedic effect when retelling stories of dealing with others’ homophobic or heteronormative quips (e.g., family members asking, “How’s the boyfriend?”). For gay and lesbian influencers, progressive self-revelation of sexuality and assuming a normatively recognizable non-heterosexual subjectivity contributes to performances of authenticity (Lovelock, 2017). Similarly, participants’ visual cues of sexual identity, in combination with intimate content, provided them with an LGBTQ brand that audiences could easily identify. In certain lines of work that challenge normative social roles or activities, such as burlesque dancing or tattooing, displays of non-heterosexuality may also contribute to one’s professional authenticity in terms of performing a knowledgeable, skilled self with insider status in these occupations that are sometimes perceived as subcultural. However, Julie’s downplaying of her sexual identity and limited pictures of her same-sex partner in her Instagram account served as a reminder that some occupations pair uneasily with LGBTQ identities. Since her children’s programs were often affiliated with a church, she felt that representations of her sexual identity “could pose a threat potentially, especially with children. People might say things like, ‘I don’t want you to turn my kids gay.’” These contrasting examples highlight how LGBTQ identities retain, and even accrue, a politics of representation when incorporated into aesthetic self-branding.

Aspiring Relational Labor

Several participants attempted to forge relationships with other popular users, including influencers and conventional celebrities, in order to increase their engagement and following. Kelzz participated in a celebrity’s dance video contest, which promised the reward of having the winning video reposted to the celebrity’s account. She reasoned, “It’ll reach somebody who has zero followers to somebody who has 15,000 followers . . . so when a celebrity will post my stuff then it’s kind of like, it can help in any kind of way.” Upon winning, she gained thousands of followers resulting from the celebrity’s public recognition. Other participants sought out LGBTQ influencers, feeling that they could more easily connect with them over shared identity and that their content would also appeal to these individuals’ LGBTQ audiences. Alex relied on the reach of a popular transgender Instagrammer to accrue an initial mass of followers for the androgynous fashion account:

Eventually Grayson Papp . . . shouted out my account on his personal page and it just blew up, so I ended up asking him to come in as the co-owner and he really made things take off. Within a month, I had reached my goal of 1,000 followers.

“Shouting out” is the act of mentioning another user by username in a photo, which links the image to their account. It is a common practice on Instagram, reflecting the broader culture of reciprocity on social media where users engage in (often) mutually beneficial forms of social exchange (Lewis, 2015). This shout out brought Alex’s account to the attention of Grayson’s followers and, since Grayson was a seasoned Instagrammer, his advice in “co-owning” or co-managing the account helped it to gain visibility. Since Ellen DeGeneres was one of few celebrities on Vine and hosted several “Vine famous” individuals on her daytime talk show (e.g., Brow, 2016), Jaxx considered this when producing her content: “Look, if Ellen DeGeneres finds my Vine and I happened to use the wrong word when I was ignorant and stupid—I’m very conscious about how people are going to read it.” As her skits had the capacity to resonate with both Ellen’s LGBTQ-friendly audiences and the talk show’s comedic themes, Jaxx ensured her Vine content was appropriate for Ellen’s broader television audiences. In these ways, participants aimed to augment their social capital through relationships that could lead to a monetizable following.

Other participants formed relationships with more immediate outcomes for increasing economic capital. Popular Viners who purchased Chrissy’s paintings re-Vined her videos, showcasing her artwork to their followers. She felt that
this was “because people kind of get to know me . . . so it makes them want to be part of my success.” Her relationships with these users held the promise of greater publicity and sales. Similarly, Queenie’s Instagramming became a form of professional networking:

We went to the grand opening of [a vegan shop] and one of the owners came right up and said, “Oh my gosh, I follow you guys on Instagram.” Then I found her and we’ve been posting anything we’ve made from there too . . . I recently had a job change and just actually reached out to her and said, you know, “I believe in your company, let me know if there’s any openings” and she replied immediately and said, “Oh my god, send a resumé, we want you.”

Queenie and her girlfriend regularly tagged the store’s Instagram account in photos of vegan food that they made with ingredients purchased there. Through these consistent efforts to forge a connection with the shop, Queenie paved the way for her future employment.

While relational labor involves the upkeep of broad audiences through social media, it also includes the maintenance of sustained relationships. As Baym (2018) specifies, “relational labour has the potential to bring both revenue and meaningful connection” (p. 28). Unlike musicians who are attempting to connect with their established audiences, the women I spoke with started their accounts in relative obscurity with relation to potential clients, fans, or followers. Several sought to forge meaningful and potentially lucrative relationships with already established influencers and celebrities. These relationships can lead to a transfer of followers or greater public attention, as is often the case with collaboration vlogs on YouTube, where a popular YouTuber features a lesser known user in a video (Morris & Anderson, 2015). This sort of reversal, where everyday individuals tailor their self-representation and communicative approach in order to form relationships with established users can be thought of as aspiring relational labor. This labor constitutes a bottom-up form of networking rather than top-down relationship maintenance. Aspects of this labor resemble “hustling” (Carter, 2016), comprising techniques that influencers use to make their content appealing to brands, such as through unpaid product promotion and aesthetic manipulation of content to align with ad campaigns. Elements of hustling were apparent in Jaxx’s Ellen-appropriate skits and Queenie’s showcasing of the vegan shop’s products. However, negotiating relationships with people—not just brands—requires managing intimacy as “a pull toward interpersonal closeness that counters pulls toward distance, publicness, formality, and techno-capitalist alienation” (Baym, 2018, p. 22). Celebrities and influencers tend to maintain boundaries with their fans, which can inhibit actual relationships even while appearing to put on personal displays. Therefore, participants’ aspiring relational labor mobilizes not only aesthetic branding but also shared LGBTQ identity in hopes of traversing this distance to form relationships that other fans may be unable to forge.

Aspiring relational labor can be understood as a subset of broader aspirational labor enacted in recognition of the “instrumentality of affective relationships” (Duffy, 2016, p. 449). Duffy (2016) observes that aspirants conduct affective labor through networking and constant engagement with others’ content with the instrumental purpose of increasing their metrics in the form of followers, likes, and rankings. As participants attempted to connect with established influencers and celebrities, as well as audiences more generally, being able to “run a lot of numbers”—as Chrissy called it—was consistently on their minds. Kelzz described her followers’ engagement with photos as “my pusher, it tells me to keep going.” The management of metrics intertwined with technical aspects of developmental aesthetic labor, as participants attempted to give the appearance of successful audience engagement. Alex scrolled back and deleted photos that did not receive a lot of likes while Julie maintained a specific ratio of connections: “On Instagram it’s important to have more followers than followees, or at least I try to be equal-ish.” Queenie’s intimate affective and aesthetic labor combined in content that boosted her metrics:

Anything that’s slightly sexual or nudity-wise is the stuff that blows up. And because of that, I absolutely do it and use it to my benefit but . . . I just think it’s super tragic that those are the ones that get promoted all over the place when I feel like I have stuff that means a lot more that doesn’t go that far.

Although Queenie did not always want sexual content to be at the forefront of her self-representations, her attentiveness to audiences’ engagement with it mirrors that of other participants who noted quantifiable surges in attention when posting about sexuality and sexual identity.

Instagram and Vine’s prominent display of metrics reinforced participants’ preoccupation with upkeeping instrumental relationships. Chrissy expressed that although Vine’s loop counter increased with every view of her videos, this was a weak indicator of engagement:

If I get, like, a thousand loops and I only get ten re-vines, I’m like, “What the hell? You all just sitting here watching my Vine but you don’t want to like it or re-Vine it?” So, it’s annoying. I think they should have never come up with the loop thing.

She relied on the popular users in her network to re-Vine her content but hypothesized that the loop counter dissuaded this, since it increased even when viewers were passive. Platforms shaped participants’ aspiring relational labor, in combination with other modes of labor, as individuals aimed to instrumentally increase their engagement metrics.

Conclusion

These findings and analyses contribute to broader discussions of platforms, labor, and identity in multiple ways. First, they bring contemporary microcelebrity and influencer literature
into dialogue with individuals’ everyday social media practices, which intertwine personal self-representation with a range of entrepreneurial endeavors, from day jobs to side-gigs and monetizable hobbies. While participants constituted aspirational laborers (Duffy, 2016) in their forward-looking anticipation of building a following, they generally did not possess the specialized training common to up-and-coming fashion and beauty bloggers. Instead, they engaged in overlapping modes of labor involving microcelebrity practice but also belying the aspirational gap between themselves and established relational laborers (Baym, 2018). The affective labor of microcelebrity, involving personal disclosure and the maintenance of relationships with a niche audience (Marwick, 2016), was intensified through participants’ intimate disclosures of sexual identity. Their intimate affective labor contributed to the formation of close relationships with followers while also demarcating audiences into LGBTQ market niches. Participants’ developmental aesthetic labor, which would become tacit if mastered (Abidin, 2016), supported self-branding that catered to these niches through the display of LGBTQ fashion and symbols. These modes of labor also contributed to participants’ aspirational relational labor, whereby they attempted to forge meaningful and lucrative relationships with influencers or celebrities. Overall, these modes of labor overlap in users’ efforts to form self-representations with the potential to accrue social and economic capital.

Platform markets, governance mechanisms, and infrastructures clearly shape these modes of labor. Although participants lacked the volumes of followers needed to attain brand partnerships, some reaped the benefits of greater publicity, more clients, or product sales through platforms’ multi-sided markets, where participants constituted platform users, content producers, and sellers of goods or services all at once. Differing protocols of platform governance enabled participants to convey varying degrees of affective intimacy, with Instagram’s strict prohibition of nudity and reporting system inhibiting sexual displays more than Vine’s comparatively relaxed guidelines. Contrasting infrastructures scaffolded participants’ developmental aesthetic labor, requiring time and effort to acquire proficiency with Instagram’s editing tools or to supplement Vine’s streamlined features with third-party apps. The influential role of these platform elements reflects findings from other studies that identify how individuals’ self-branding practices are platform-specific, shaped by the affordances and norms of each platform (Marwick, 2015; Scolere et al., 2018).

While it is possible that other intimate aspects of identity could support these modes of labor, sexual identity was integral in the instances explored here. It served as a form of intimacy, a self-branding aesthetic that conveyed authenticity, and as a common ground from which to form relationships. In prior observations about microcelebrity and queer women’s self-representation, I highlighted the visibility these practices contributed to LGBTQ identities on social media (Duguay, 2018). However, with the rapid professionalization of platformed cultural production, social media economies pose a complicated landscape for LGBTQ self-representation. In part, the findings discussed support Lovelock’s (2017) assertion that “practices of authenticity, self-branding and self-revelation” (p. 93) that are intrinsic to social media celebrity favor the representation of homonormative gay and lesbian identities, which do not challenge broader heteronormative social and cultural structures. The use of lesbian hashtags or the aesthetic placement of rainbows may appear as benign elements of participants’ aspirational labor in service of self-commodification without delivering any particular activist discourses or counter-hegemonic messages. However, the enduring threat that participants’ self-representations posed to heteronormativity (and patriarchy) was evidenced in user and platform responses to their content, including homophobic and misogynistic harassment, sexual censorship, the dissuasion of homophobic clients, and the positive reception from LGBTQ followers who desire to see the everyday lives others like them. If microcelebrity practices rendered LGBTQ identities completely benign, these responses would be unlikely.

These queer women’s experiences lend strength to the idea that intimacy, generated through disclosures of sexual identity, can forge meaningful relationships while enabling greater participation in social media economies. This extends Raun’s (2018) findings about YouTube influencers to Instagram and Vine, understanding intimacy as enabling a negotiation between self-commodification and political representation of sexual minorities. Furthermore, Abidin and Cover (2019) describe how, upon attaining a large following, a gay influencer can “take on new responsibilities as an out queer subject through a more public discourse of one’s personal, private and domestic gendered and sexual life as a form of discursive activism” while simultaneously taking on “queer-branded sponsorship work” (p. 228). Through the modes of labor discussed here, many of these queer women appear to be positioning themselves to take on this twofold role if they find success in this industry.

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