

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

**Masking Hegemony with Makeup:
How Social Media Influencers Enforce Hegemony via Corporate Sponsored Beauty
Products**

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Abstract

In an era where beauty influencing has become a cornerstone of social media consumption for young women, this thesis investigates the subtle yet powerful role of digital beauty influencers in reinforcing hegemonic beauty standards. It specifically scrutinizes the contributions of influencers Michelle Phan, James Charles, and Alix Earle within the \$532 billion beauty industry, mapping their influence on their predominantly female audiences and the broader cultural discourse on beauty (Danziger, 2019). Employing a feminist media theory perspective, this research engages primarily with Gramsci's hegemony theory and Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry, intertwined with Nancy Baym's relational labour and Miranda J. Banks' below-the-line labour to conduct a nuanced textual analysis of these influencers' content. The study reveals how influencers, often misconstrued as independent agents, are enmeshed in a network of corporate interests and patriarchal norms, thus perpetuating established societal standards under the guise of personal narrative and autonomy. It critically examines the intersectionality of gender, power, and consumerism that influencers navigate, demonstrating their role in sustaining the status quo through strategic content creation that blurs the lines between personal endorsements and corporate advertising. This thesis underscores the necessity for heightened consumer awareness and media literacy, given the pervasive role commercial strategies have in influencer marketing. By highlighting these influencers' dual role as followers and enforcers of cultural hegemony, the research calls for a re-evaluation of how beauty standards and products are marketed and consumed in the digital age.

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Introduction

“Have you ever dressed up like a superhero when you were a child? You’d wear the towel as a cape and felt so strong, nothing could hurt you; you were invincible. Makeup is similar to a superhero costume; after you wear it, you feel confident and strong; sometimes it’s your alter ego... whatever it is, you feel stronger.”

- (Michelle Phan, 2009)

This seemingly innocent and genuine quote was said by the very pioneer of beauty gurus and beauty influencing, Michelle Phan. However, I hope that upon reading my research, the reader will understand the nuances, cultural oppression, and enforcement of capitalistic, patriarchal and hierarchal structures that this quote enforces. Phan kickstarted beauty influencing, a booming and however recent industry, that fuels the \$532 Billion dollar beauty industry (Danziger, 2019). Many influencers have followed Phan’s footsteps, and made a living off of creating content that endorses beauty products, and with that the aims and power of the beauty industry.

There are countless influencers who follow suit and enforce this hegemony through their content. However, this paper focuses primarily on Michelle Phan, (the pioneer of beauty influencing), James Charles, (the highest-earning beauty content creator of the last year), and Alix Earle, who is widely regarded as the newest it-girl of beauty influencing (NeoReach, 2022) (Carrarra, 2022) (McKenzie, 2023).

My topic of research will be concentrating on Michelle Phan, James Charles and Alix Earle, beauty influencers who target largely female audiences, and how they use these digital spaces to push hegemonic and patriarchal beauty ideals onto women in the form of sponsored products. I will be doing a textual analysis using feminist media theory, to understand these intersections between influencer content and the enforcement of hegemony. I will largely be referencing Gramsci’s theory of media hegemony, Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry, and Miranda J. Bank’s theory on “below-the-line” vs “above-the-line” labor, and how women’s work in creative

industries often falls “below-the-line”. I will be explaining how this is the case with many beauty influencers, whose content is manipulated by the large beauty conglomerates who sponsor them for product endorsement. Though fashion and beauty products are marketed in large towards women, both these industries are in large owned and operated by men. Therefore, corporate-backed beauty trends and ideals are a form of continuing the status quo and enforcing patriarchal beauty standards.

With social media being a part of everyday life, there is an increase in the number of individuals who are monetizing their social media presence. As the number of these so-called “beauty influencers” increases, so does their span and influence on social media users. Particularly with their female-based audiences, it is important to understand the ways in which these influencers are enforcing pre-existing beauty standards, and the ways in which these hegemonic norms are used to promote beauty products. Though social media influencers are often seen as independent contractors who work for themselves, there is more at play that influences the nature of their content. It is imperative to research these intersections between social media influencers, product placement, the conglomerates which produce and pay for the advertisement of said products, and hegemonic beauty norms. This is imperative in order to promote consumer awareness, especially for the targeted young female audiences of these ads. This is especially relevant as the line between influencer media content and advertisements begins to blur. In this paper, I argue that beauty influencers, many of whom are directly sponsored by large beauty conglomerates, enforce hegemonic ideals about beauty and femininity, perpetuating the beauty status quo.

Theory and Methodology

This chapter discusses and provides an overview of the theories and methods that I will be using to undertake my analysis. It starts with an overview of a feminist textual analysis, which is the methodology I will be using, and then gives an overview of the theories that will be applied, including: Lisbet Van Zoonen's feminist media theory, Antonio Gramsci's hegemony theory, and Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry, which are the main theoretical frameworks of this paper. It will also provide a brief explanation of some of the accompanying theories. These include Miranda J Banks' theory of below-the-line labour, and Nancy Baym's relational labour.

Methodology: Feminist Textual Analysis

I will be researching how social media influencers used corporate-sponsored products to enforce hegemonic ideals of beauty and femininity. This will be researched using a feminist textual analysis of social media posts, particularly on YouTube and Tik Tok. I will be focusing specifically on three influencers, all of whom have a specific and important role in the beauty industry. This includes Michelle Phan, who is widely known as the first "beauty guru", who started posting makeup tutorials on YouTube in 2007 (Neoreach, 2022). Secondly, I will be studying Alix Earle, a highly popular influencer who gained traction over the last year on her TikTok account, and is often touted as "Tik Tok's Newest It Girl" (Mckenzie, 2023). Lastly, the analysis will include James Charles, an American YouTuber and make-up artist who was the highest paid influencer of 2022 (Carrarra, 2022). From each of these YouTubers, I will be analyzing 1-2 videos from their YouTube or TikTok profiles to connect back to my research question.

A standard textual analysis considers many aspects of a text to understand and describe its content and functions, to ultimately understand the messages contained within the text. Contrary to popular belief, a text does not have to be a written document, but rather anything that is used to create meaning. (McKee, 2003). A textual analysis considers the author of the text, the text's intended audience, the content of the text (in this case, the visual and audio components of videos being analyzed), when it was created, its place of creation, the author's intention behind its creation, and the apparent purpose of the text. Ultimately, a textual analysis acknowledges that all texts have a level of bias, and that texts are also to be considered within their cultural context to fully understand the reality behind them (McKee, 2003). As such, a textual analysis will greatly benefit my analysis of social media content, as the content that I am analyzing is heavily based on context, including the influencers creating the content, their choice of social media platform, and their intention behind the video (such as product promotion). It also heavily relies on a western cultural context to understand the creator's usage of hegemonic Western beauty ideals and how they are embedded or enforced in the videos.

Beyond a standard textual analysis, this paper specifically utilizes a feminist textual analysis, in accordance with its themes and goals. A feminist textual analysis places media representations of women at its forefront. "The main task for feminist media research is to unravel both the dominant and alternative meanings of gender encoded in media texts, and their articulation with other discourses such as for instance, ethnicity, class and sexuality" (Van Zoonen, 1994). This is paramount in understanding the female audiences that are targeted by this media content, and the ways that influencers push patriarchal beauty ideals and hegemonic norms on to them. The feminist aspect of this textual analysis is largely informed by Liesbet Van

Zoonen's *Feminist Media Studies*, which will be explained further in the theory portion of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Media Theory:

Though the initial ideas about feminist media theory date back to Betty Friedan in 1963. One of the most widely cited scholars to discuss feminist media theory is Liesbet Van Zoonen, who details the theory in her 1994 text "Feminist Media Studies" (Van Zoonen, 1994). According to Van Zoonen, the theory acknowledges that feminism has its initial roots in white, first-world and sometimes neocolonial biases. Feminism was originally united in the agreed-upon causes of women's oppression, which was thought to lie in social structures. Depending on the branch of feminism, these social structures understood to cause women's oppression may include capitalism, patriarchy, or general sexist society, according to the beliefs of the individual group. The theory also acknowledges that accordingly, "women" are not a homogenous or unified group and that different groups of women have different goals and aims. and feminist theory does not have a consistent approach or a homogenous field, but some common concepts distinguish feminism from other perspectives, such as a focus on "analysing gender as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them" (p.3). However, this does not mean that gender is the *only* defining factor in society and understanding human relations, and thus it is important to account for how other facets of identity such as sexuality, class, or ethnicity intersect with gender. Van Zoonen takes the approach that meaning, including meaning associated with gender and identity, are fluid. Aside from gender, power is a key element of feminist thought. and "power" is not a monolithic concept that some possess and others do not. Though Van Zoonen is hesitant to apply the label, her approach to feminist media theory uses a

post-structuralist approach, though she acknowledges that there are disputes and contradictions surrounding the meaning of post-structuralism. Van Zoonen's aim with feminist media theory is not solely dedicated to deciphering who is "in power" and who is not, but rather to theorize and understand the "many intersections and relations of subordination" (p.4). According to Van Zoonen, "gender and power form the constituents of feminist theory" (p.4). Beyond this, her approach to feminist media theory is also heavily influenced by cultural studies and employs a cultural studies framework, as according to Van Zoonen, "gender is a, if not *the*, crucial component of culture" (p.6). Furthermore, mass communication and media are facets of culture and popular culture. Lastly, the theory is mindful of the constructions of meaning and the processes of meaning-making, including semiotics and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model.

Along with this text, my research is primarily informed by the book "Feminist Approaches to Media Theory and Research" by Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke and Ingrid Bachmann (Harp et al., 2018). The theory focuses on gender and matters of power, culture, agency, hierarchy and representation in media practices and discourses. The big question asked by this theory is "how, and to whose avail, particular ideological constructs of femininity are produced in media content" (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 24, as cited in Harp et al., 2018). As such, the theory explores and exposes patriarchal notions and ideas as perpetuated in media, and the ways in which the male is set up as the norm, and the female as "the other". As media can marginalize or misrepresent, the aim of feminist media studies is to explore, understand and challenge the implications of gender as represented in media. Through my study of influencer media representations, I apply this lens to study the intersections of gender with these listed issues. Furthermore, feminist media studies is an important informational lens which lends itself to my study of hegemony, as "when it comes to feminist media studies, the focus is on how these issues

are created, promoted, and normalized in one of the most important institutional sites for hegemony- mass media” (Harp et al., 2018, p. 4).

Cultural Hegemony:

Cultural hegemony, as described by Antonio Gramsci, is a theory outlining the dominance of one group over another through cultural power via norms and ideas (Gramsci, 1947/1971). The theory references analytical and cultural power as opposed to direct power. In media, it refers to the ways that a dominant way of life and thought is perpetuated in media content. Hegemony theory originates from Marxist philosophy and was first outlined by Antonio Gramsci the 1971 translation of his prison journal. Furthermore, media hegemony is a type of cultural hegemony exploring the ways cultural hegemony is enforced in media (Gramsci, 1947/1971).

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony constitutes a foundational concept within Marxist thought, particularly in understanding the mechanisms through which dominant ideologies maintain control over society. Hegemony, as articulated by Gramsci, encompasses two distinct but interrelated dimensions. Firstly, hegemony denotes political domination, where a ruling class establishes its authority and maintains control over the state and civil society. This form of hegemony involves the exercise of power through coercion, institutions, and the legal system to uphold the interests of the ruling elite while suppressing dissent and opposition.

However, Gramsci also introduces the concept of cultural hegemony, which extends beyond mere political domination to encompass the control of cultural norms, values, and beliefs within society. Cultural hegemony operates through the dissemination of ideologies and the construction of consent, whereby the ruling class establishes its worldview as the dominant and

natural order of things. This form of hegemony is more subtle and pervasive, influencing not only political structures but also shaping social relations, identities, and everyday practices.

Moreover, Gramsci's analysis of hegemony extends to the realm of media and communication, where he explores how the ruling class utilizes media institutions to disseminate and reinforce hegemonic ideologies. Media hegemony refers to the dominance of media organizations by powerful corporate interests, which shape public discourse and influence popular opinion in ways that align with their economic and political agendas. Through control over media content, ownership, and advertising, dominant groups exert significant influence over public perceptions, social values, and cultural narratives. Gramsci's critique of media hegemony underscores the role of communication technologies in reproducing and legitimizing existing power structures, highlighting the need for alternative forms of media and grassroots activism to challenge hegemonic discourses and promote social change. The concepts of media hegemony are still very relevant today, and can be applied to social media as will be discussed in this paper.

The Culture Industry:

The culture industry was described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their 1944 book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). The chapter which contains this theory is entitled *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. Originally written in German, I am compiling my research from a 2002 translation of the chapter by Gunzelin Noerr and Edmund Jephcott. Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry theory claims that all mass-produced content has a level of sameness due to the conglomerates that own and fund mass media. This can also be applied to the beauty influencer industry due to sponsorships from the beauty and cosmetic industry, which also has a conglomerate nature. I will also be referencing Adorno and Horkheimer's theories on "The Culture Industry" to analyze how

a large portion of the content created by these influencers has a level of sameness due to the corporate influence. This is because the conglomerate nature of the beauty industry mirrors that of the media industry, with a small number of companies holding a majority of the market share.

Adorno and Horkheimer's work presents a challenging critique of the commodification and standardization of culture within capitalist societies. Originally published in German in the mid-20th century, this chapter remains a cornerstone of critical theory and cultural studies. At its core, the theory posits that the culture industry, encompassing mass media, entertainment, and popular culture, functions as a mechanism for perpetuating capitalist hegemony and mass manipulation. Rather than serving as vehicles for genuine enlightenment or artistic expression, cultural products produced by the industry are crafted to generate profit and maintain social control.

Central to Adorno and Horkheimer's argument is the notion that the culture industry homogenizes cultural experiences, reducing them to easily digestible commodities designed for mass consumption. Through techniques such as standardization, repetition, and formulaic content, the culture industry fosters a sense of sameness across various media forms, from film and television to music and literature. This uniformity, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, undermines the critical faculties of consumers, fostering passive consumption and conformity rather than independent thought or artistic appreciation.

Moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer contend that the culture industry operates as a form of ideological apparatus, perpetuating dominant ideologies and reinforcing existing power structures. By promoting hegemonic ideologies, cultural products produced by the industry serve to uphold the status quo and obscure the underlying contradictions of capitalist society. In this way, the culture industry functions as a tool of social control, masquerading as a source of

entertainment and enlightenment while perpetuating mass deception and reinforcing the dominant ideology. Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry remains highly relevant in contemporary society, offering valuable insights into the intersections of culture, capitalism, and social control. Beyond the traditional mass media that Adorno and Horkheimer's critique refers to, this critique can also apply to the formulaic nature and current climate of influencer social-media posts.

Below-the-line labour:

Below-the-line labour, a theory by Miranda J. Banks is described in the 2009 text *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. It is detailed in Banks' chapter "Gender Below-the-line: Defining Feminist Production Studies (Mayer et al., 2009). In summary, Banks' theory explains how in creative industries, certain work is valued and seen as irreplaceable, whereas other work is undervalued, replaceable, and more negotiable in pay. The former form of work is known as "above-the-line" labour, whereas the latter is known as "below-the-line" labour. The "line" refers to a physical line that is placed through the cost sheet of a media production, such as a Hollywood film. This line is an indicator of negotiable and non-negotiable workers and their pay, with non-negotiables being above the line and negotiables being below. Above-the-line workers are typically producers, directors, and sometimes film actors. Below-the-line workers include costume/set designers, camera people and makeup artists. Accordingly, below-the-line labour in creative industries is often done by women, whereas above-the-line labour is usually done by men. This theory can also be applied to female beauty influencers and the way their labour is viewed by the cosmetic/beauty industry.

Relational Labour:

Relational Labour is a theory by Nancy Baym, outlined in the book *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* from 2018. It is a theory about how celebrities interact with and connect to their audiences. It talks about the emotional labour of how they relate to their audiences, and the commodification of emotions. While the theory is written about musicians, it can be applied to other celebrities and in this case, influencers as well. An important aspect of this theory highlights that a lot of value is placed on public performances feeling “natural” or authentic. This emphasis on authenticity is useful in understanding how brands sell products in sponsored influencer content (Baym, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter lays the foundation for the comprehensive exploration of these theories within the context of influencer beauty content. The chosen methodology of a feminist textual analysis, centered on social media posts from prominent influencers James Charles, Michelle Phan, and Alix Earle, will allow for a nuanced examination of gender representations, power dynamics, and cultural influences embedded in sponsored content. The usage of a feminist textual analysis will allow me to thoroughly dissect and understand this material. The theoretical framework, anchored by Liesbet Van Zoonen’s feminist media theory, Antonio Gramsci’s hegemony theory, and Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry, provides a basis for dissecting the complexities of media content creation and consumption.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to provide relevant background information on the key themes that relate to my thesis through an analysis and evaluation of relevant literature. These themes include hegemonic beauty ideals as they relate to women, influencer and celebrity culture, and corporations and conglomerates within the beauty industry. By collecting and understanding literature on each of these topics, this chapter will provide a cohesive foundation of knowledge for the themes highlighted above. Furthermore, the understanding of these themes will drive my analysis as the application and understanding of relevant research will lead to a thorough analysis through an informed lens. Beyond providing background information, I will also evaluate the content of these bodies of literature and explain how exactly they will inform my research. In doing so I will also explain some of the intersections between my themes and the literature corresponding to them. The organization of this chapter will include a subsection for each theme related to my literature review. Relating to each theme, I will provide an overview of it with a brief explanation and some background information, including its key findings. I will also describe the sources related to the theme and how they inform my research and further analysis. Lastly, I will end the chapter with a brief conclusion.

Hegemony as it Relates to Beauty

To build a foundation of knowledge to understand my thesis, it is imperative to understand how hegemony relates to beauty. In order to do so, I have familiarized myself with literature that makes this connection. This includes literature about hegemony/media hegemony and its definitions, as well as literature about current beauty ideals for women and how they are cemented in society due to media hegemony. This includes more recent sources on the topic, as well as the original historical frameworks of it. In outlining this literature, I hope to explain how

hegemony was first understood, and how it today relates to femininity and feminine beauty standards.

Cultural hegemony was first described by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his prison notebooks, which were written between 1929 and 1935. The definition pertains to the dominance of one group over another through cultural power via norms and ideas (Gramsci, 1947/1971). In media, it refers to the ways that a dominant way of life and thought is perpetuated in media content. This concept, known as media hegemony, is an extension of and an example of cultural hegemony, exploring the ways cultural hegemony is exercised in media. Media hegemony is explained more in-depth by Altheide in his work *Media Hegemony: A Failure of Perspective*. Building on Gramsci's original formulations, Altheide defines media hegemony as "...the dominance of a certain way of life and thought and to the way in which that dominant concept of reality is diffused through public as well as private dimensions of social life (Altheide, 1984, p. 477). Furthermore, hegemony is "rooted in the Marxist view of the economic foundations of a society as the most important shapers of culture, values, and ideology" (Altheide, 1984, p. 477). These definitions and examples that pertain to hegemony explain that media hegemony shapes perceptions of how one's life should be lived in both public and private spheres. This includes ideas about gender, including femininity and the beauty ideals associated with it. Furthermore, an emphasis is placed on how the economic foundations of society can shape hegemonic norms and ideas.

In a capitalistic society, these economic foundations include spending habits and consumption habits, as is highlighted in cases of how beauty products are sold to affirm notions of femininity. This is further detailed in the article *Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility* by Rosalind Gill (2007). This text details how contemporary media presents the

possession of beauty as a key role in the identity of women (Gill, 2007, p. 149). As the media presents beauty as a key role in the feminine identity, this identity can in turn be commodified by the beauty industry. Especially in a post-feminist context, there is a preoccupation with the female body, with femininity being defined as a bodily property “as opposed to a social, structural or psychological one” (Gill, 2007, p.149). A part of this preoccupation is the priority placed on the self-surveillance of the female body to attain ideals of beauty. Some of the ways in which the female body is surveilled include “constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness” (Gill, 2007, p. 149). This link between the emphasis on female self-surveillance is something that trickles down from celebrities or influencers and into “ordinary”/non-celebrity women. There are a multitude of examples in which media pushes women into these hegemonic ideals of beauty through consumption and self-surveillance, including makeover TV shows in which women are heavily criticized for “their bodies, postures and wardrobes” (Gill, 2007, p. 150). Hegemonic ideals inform ideas of femininity beyond just appearances; performances of femininity are informed by a multitude of consumer habits, such as one’s makeup, clothing, or even the way one would host guests (Gill, 2007, p. 155). The article *Racialized beauty, visibility, and empowerment: Asian American women influencers on YouTube* by Dason Kim heavily references Gill’s article to apply the understanding of the commercialization of femininity to a modern context (Kim, D. 2013). Kim’s article specifically details how notions of feminine empowerment that are driven by consumption apply to influencer culture and young women on the internet. The article explains how beauty and fashion influencer culture has been similarly laced with concepts of self-empowerment through consumption and purchasing habits. Kim explains how influencer culture relies on a culture of self-surveillance for women. Furthermore,

the article delves deeper into the nuances of the white beauty ideal and how women of colour, specifically Asian-American content creators, navigate the social media influencing sphere. Kim's article also specifically talks about Michelle Phan as a trailblazer in the YouTube beauty community (Kim, 2023). Beyond the connections to feminine identity and consumerism, this article is very informative to my topic of research as Michelle Phan is one of the beauty influencers whose content I will analyze in this paper.

As such, this article explains how mass media heavily emphasizes beauty as an imperative function of feminine identity, as well as how this can tie feminine identity to consumption and self-surveillance. As is exemplified in Gill's article, mass media can define gender roles and the behaviours associated with them. The idea that mass media can define gender roles also ties into the idea of hegemony and was first addressed by second-wave feminist figure Betty Friedan in 1963 (Harp et al., 2018). Though there have been changes in the way media affirms gender roles, even today media continues to marginalize and misrepresent women through presentations of femininity. *Feminist Approaches to Media Theory* by Harp et al. provides a functional approach to understanding the overlap between media and feminine identity, and how to approach media and media theories from a feminist perspective (Harp et al., 2018). This book informs my research as it explains how ideas about beauty and femininity have been "created, promoted, and normalized" in mass media, which is one of the most important sites of hegemony (Harp et al., 2018, p.4). Harp et al.'s book heavily relies on the concepts and key ideas of feminist media studies and applies them to a more contemporary context. The book heavily cites predecessors in the field, with the most recurring citation being *Feminist Media Studies* by Liesbet Van Zoonen (Van Zoonen, 1994). Van Zoonen is one of the first to publish academic work on this topic, and it is imperative to read and understand her book to thoroughly

apply the lens of feminist media theory to my research. Van Zoonen's book provides insight into "the enormous heterogeneity of feminist media theory and media research that has been produced in the past decades" (Van Zoonen, 1994, p.2). Both of these sources inform my research because this paper relies on the connections between gender roles and hegemony in mass media to parallel and explain how the two are also connected within the realm of social media.

As has been highlighted in this subsection, the literature I have selected for this paper has been used to inform my understanding of hegemony as it relates to ideals of beauty. The chosen literature related to these themes has been synthesized to build a foundation on the knowledge which will inform my analysis.

Influencer and Celebrity Culture

Celebrity/influencer culture is an extensive topic that pertains to my thesis. To effectively analyze the perpetuation of hegemonic beauty ideals by influencers, it is first imperative to understand what exactly an influencer is, the way their work is viewed and valued within the social media industry, and the advertising/marketing methods they may employ. There is considerable overlap within the definitions and roles of celebrities and influencers, which is why celebrity theories can mostly be applied in an effective manner. However, though the distinctions between social media influencers and traditional celebrities are somewhat ambiguous and not completely clear-cut, influencers distinguish themselves largely by promoting products on social media, while celebrities have gained recognition through various cultural endeavors and achievements beyond the realm of social media marketing. (Carrillat & Ilicic, 2019). As such, Influencers acquire celebrity capital differently from celebrities. Celebrities attain their status independently of endorsement and advertising activities, often through achievements in their

field (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). On the other hand, influencers gain their celebrity capital through self-promotion on social media to build a sizeable fan base that can attract advertisers (Ang et al., 2016).

Compared to celebrities, influencers are associated with branding and endorsements earlier on in their careers when compared with celebrities, as “user-generated content of interest are primarily concerned with consumption objects: fashion, food, home décor.” (McQuarrie et al., 2013). It is important to understand that the existence and success of influencers is based mostly on media relations and their ability to sell products by convictions of femininity and hegemony, combined with other marketing methods. This uniqueness of the role of an influencer in media marketing makes them a perfect example and case study when it comes to understanding hegemony in beauty and the ways it is used to sell products. Furthermore, influencer marketing presents a more “personal” feel to marketing, changing the way that corporations interact with and advertise to their intended audiences (Baym, 2018).

With the above information in mind, it is important to understand how influencers fit within the broader landscape of the industry they are a part of. The culture industry references mass-produced media content, and many of its elements can be applied to social media content by influencers. Paralleling mass-produced content, social media content is abundantly available to the masses and is produced at a rate that far surpasses the mass-media content that Adorno and Horkheimer referred to in their *Dialectic of Engagement*. For this reason, the culture industry, as literature based on mass-media production, provides knowledge that is imperative to understand and will inform my analysis. Related to the culture industry, there are other theories about the labour associated with celebrity work. For example, many bodies of literature explain the hierarchy behind mass-produced work. As is outlined in Miranda J Bank’s chapter on *Gender*

Below the Line from the book *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, there is a lot that goes on behind the scenes of media productions that is not transparent in the finished media production (Caldwell et al., 2009). Employees on a media production are often valued and paid according to the presumed value and replaceability of their work (Banks, 2009). Those whose work is more valued, such as producers, are placed “above-the-line”, with “the line” being a physical marker on the expense spreadsheet that “distinguishes between creative and craft professions in productions” (Banks, 2009, p. 89). Producers, for example, are incredibly valued in media production work because of the creative nature of their occupation, and because they secure funding for the production. Directors are also considered above-the-line because their creative vision is also integral to the film. However, actors can vary in their status, with lead actors being valued more than extras. More workers who fall below-the-line include set designers, fashion designers, and hair and makeup artists. This work highlights that there is a large gender divide in media production, with below-the-line workers often being majority women, and above-the-line workers as majority men (Banks, 2009). This literature is integral to understanding my analysis because these understandings of the gendered division and value of labour in creative fields are something that applies to my study of influencers. The corporations and conglomerates that sponsor influencer content can be compared with the producers of a media production, as in this case, both corporations and producers secure funding for the content. Furthermore, as will be detailed in the later part of my literature review, most of these corporations and conglomerates are owned and operated by men. Drawing a parallel between influencers and below-the-line workers in media production, the influencers who advertise beauty products are almost exclusively women or gay men, who are placed in a “feminized position” (Gill, 2007, p. 157). Furthermore, the perceived replaceability of influencers also

mirrors that of below-the-line workers. This is because the online space of influencing is extremely saturated, and so conglomerates as “producers” can have a meticulous pick of who they want to represent their brand and how much they should be paid. While literature on celebrities within the larger picture of media work does exist, there is little literary work that specifically places influencers within the creative hierarchy of media work. I hope to address this gap by relating influencers within the sphere of production studies and below-the-line labour. This application of important theories in media and communication applied into the niche of influencer culture is something that I hope to explore, and these bodies of literature are imperative to the understanding, application and synthesis of research that will take place in this thesis.

There is also literature based on the emotional labour that celebrities use to relate to their audiences. Though not focused on influencers specifically, Nancy Baym’s book *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* touches on the nature of how celebrities interact with and connect with their audience (Baym, 2018). Beyond the production aspect as discussed above, it is important to understand the way that celebrities or public figures commodify emotions to connect with their audience and advertise goods and services. This emotional labour can also apply to influencer marketing and the ways that influencers may present themselves to develop a closeness with the audience. Similar to the culture industry and below-the-line labour, there is not a lot of research surrounding influencers specifically and their usage of relational and emotional labour. This literature enhances my analysis, especially through its explanation of the lengths that celebrities go to to ensure that their performances feel “natural” or authentic (Baym, 2018). *The intimacy triple bind: Structural inequalities and relational labour in the influencer industry* by Zoe Glatt utilizes Baym’s theory

on relational labour and applies it specifically to the influencer industry (Glatt, 2023). Because Baym's source is specifically about the music industry, Glatt's contextualization and explanation of the relational labour performed by influencers is very helpful for my analysis. Glatt's article explains that influencers commodify their personal lives and interests to build intimacy with their audiences and to build "authentic" self-branding. It is important to understand how self-branding, which is a large part of an influencer profession, is a form of relational labour. Furthermore, Glatt's article employs an intersectional feminist lens to understand "the ways in which structural inequalities shape relationships between creators and their audiences" (Glatt, 2023). Furthermore, this article particularly focuses on how the tolls of relational and emotional labour are higher for marginalized creators. This specific focus on the intersectional feminist aspect and on understanding relational labour's effects on marginalized creators thoroughly portrays the most harmful effects of emotional labour, which is important in informing my analysis.

Corporations & Conglomerates

The article *Impartial endorsements: Influencer and celebrity declarations of non-sponsorship and honesty*, while explaining the nuances of influencers and celebrities failing to disclose sponsorships, also touches on the corporate side and the regulations behind sponsorship disclosure (Lee et al., 2021). The article cites that the Federal Trade Commission (or FTC) has mandated sponsorship disclosure on social media (Lee et al., 2021). To understand my analysis, it is imperative to also understand the nuances of regulation and corporate incentives that may result in non-disclosure by influencers. To further understand the incentives behind non-disclosure and influencer motivations behind it, I am utilizing the article *Exploring social media influencers' moral dilemmas through role theory* (Cop et al., 2021). This article explains how social media influencers "find themselves in different roles depending on which stakeholders'

expectations they fulfil” (Cop et al., 2022). It explains how there is a conflict between the extended expectations of a social media influencer (such as authenticity) and the expectations of the stakeholders’ sponsoring the influencer’s content. This article explains how this discrepancy can lead to moral dilemmas for influencers, and how they may manage such conflicts of interest.

When looking at the corporate and conglomerate side of endorsements, it is also important to understand the general corporate makeup of the largest brands within the beauty industry. In doing so, I have selected a combination of literature pertaining to the history of the beauty industry. This includes news articles from reputable sites that detail the largest conglomerates within the beauty industry. I have also conducted research on the conglomerates, specifically related to finding the CEO of each company and researching their background. Also relating to my parallels between corporate-sponsored influencer posts and mass media content, it is worthwhile to understand the power and ownership behind these conglomerates.

Geoffrey’s *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* is a source that dissects the beauty industry as it is known today (Geoffrey, 2015). It provides a brief history of the global beauty industry to explain its current operations. This book talks about how large beauty conglomerates such as Estée Lauder, L’Oréal and Shiseido have imagined the beauty industry by shaping perceptions of beauty and the business organizations needed to market beauty-related products (Geoffrey, 2015). This is an important source in understanding the business structure of the industry so that my analysis can make better connections between this and what is seen on screen through influencers. This source also touches on the homogenization of beauty (Geoffrey, 2015). This homogenization of beauty ideals by corporations led to a standardization of beauty ideals around the world and was created by the desire to commercialize the industry (Geoffrey, 2015). This homogenization of beauty standards is something that can be

seen through the influencers that are being studied, as the influencers being analyzed tend to appeal to this homogenization of beauty. This connection will be further explained in the analysis. Furthermore, this paper talks about how beauty companies not only perpetuate beauty standards but also help *create* them. This can be exemplified by the ever-changing trends that are seen on social media, as explained in the following quote: “they [beauty industries] democratized access to beauty products, once the privilege of the elites, but they also defined the gender and ethnic borders of beauty...” (Geoffrey, 2015).

On this note, it is important to understand the current makeup of major beauty brands. According to a report by Business Insider, seven large conglomerates own 182 beauty brands. These conglomerates are Estée Lauder, L'Oréal, Unilever, Procter & Gamble, Coty, Shiseido, and Johnson & Johnson. Many of these conglomerates own brands that have seemingly different appeals, target audiences and price points. For example, Coty, which owns Guess and Adidas, also owns Covergirl, all of which are at drastically different price points and have different products that all fall under the “beauty industry” category (Willet-Wei & Gould, 2017). As mentioned above, I have researched the CEOs of each brand. A CEO is a valuable measurement as it helps to understand the figureheads of each company. Furthermore, CEOs are typically elected by the board members of the company because they are thought to accurately represent the brand and hold its best interests. As of January 20th 2024, of the seven CEOs in question, six appear to be male presenting (Sternberg, 2024). Six out of the seven are over the age of 54, and five out of seven appear to be of Caucasian origin. (Sternberg, 2024). This sample of the CEOs of each conglomerate echoes pre-existing cultural notions of who hegemonic ideals of beauty tend to serve (Phoenix, 2014). It is important to understand how dominant groups within society

hold economic power in the beauty industry so that the cultural hegemony and soft power they hold can be accurately understood.

Lastly, to understand the corporate motivations behind influencer product endorsements, one must understand the marketing tactics that are employed by conglomerates to sell products. An article that I used to understand different methods of influencer marketing was called *The Science Behind Influencer Marketing* (Benzu & Sanders, 2021). This article was created for brands to better understand how to market through influencers, and therefore offers valuable inside knowledge. There are multiple methods of influencer marketing, and this article details ten of them. These theories include a combination of economic principles and psychology to effectively sell products. This literature can in turn help us understand the public images presented by influencers and how they may align with certain brands.

Conclusion

This literature review provides a thorough exploration of key themes—namely hegemonic beauty ideals, influencer and celebrity culture, and corporate dynamics within the beauty industry. It traces the roots of hegemony, emphasizing its role in shaping feminine beauty standards, and analyzes influencer and celebrity culture, highlighting the unique role influencers play in marketing. The discussion on labour draws parallels with media production, offering insights into gendered divisions of labour. The exploration of corporations and conglomerates reveals historical beauty standard developments and a notable gender and cultural disparity in leadership. Lastly, an examination of marketing tactics employed by conglomerates in influencer marketing provides crucial insights. These themes create a foundation for a nuanced analysis of the many elements that shape beauty ideals in society and how they relate to social media

influencers. I hope to further explore these intersections and aid in the expansion of research on these topics.

Analysis

In this chapter, I will be analyzing select social media content (namely Tik Tok and YouTube videos) by the three influencers being analyzed in this paper. I will begin by introducing and providing some background on each of the influencers and why they provide a good case study for this picture. I will then analyze the selected videos for their relation to the key themes selected for this analysis, and will provide a discussion to further relate the key themes and findings within this paper to the content found within the videos. The key themes being explored in this analysis are: the reinforcement of hegemonic beauty ideals, Influencer culture and marketing, relational labour, non-disclosure of corporate sponsorships, and spending habits and feminine identity.

Michelle Phan

Michelle Phan is widely regarded as the first-ever beauty guru (NeoReach, 2022). Phan posted one of the first-ever video makeup tutorials on YouTube to have gained notoriety. Originally posting her videos under the pseudonym “Ricebunny”, Phan’s first-ever video, entitled “Natural Looking Makeup Tutorial” was uploaded to YouTube on May 7th, 2007 (Phan, 2007). The video now has over 12 million views (Phan, 2007). Phan also paved the way for beauty gurus and influencers to have brand sponsorships, as she was the first social media content creator to work with a makeup company. In 2010, cosmetic company Lancôme announced a partnership with Phan as their “Video Makeup Artist” (The Independent, 2010). However, it is worth noting that Phan had several makeup tutorials using almost exclusively Lancôme products years prior to this announcement, which will further be explored in the video

analysis portion of this chapter. At the time of her first video, Phan was a 20-year-old college student; however, she has had an expansive career over the past decade and a half (NeoReach, 2022).

Beyond a brand ambassadorship with Lancôme, Phan worked with several other brands, including her own cosmetic ventures with her brands IQQU and EM Cosmetics, as well as makeup subscription service IPSY, which she co-founded (“Michelle Phan”, n.d.). Phan has also delved outside of the beauty and cosmetic realm with her business ventures, including launching Shift Music Group, a record label that offers subscription-based copyright-free music (Spangler, 2014). In 2015, Phan was named in the Forbes 30 under 30 list (“Michelle Phan” n.d.). That same year, she took an abrupt hiatus from her primary platform, YouTube. In 2017, she explained why she took a hiatus from YouTube, citing issues with her self-image and mental health, legal troubles and “the failure of EM Cosmetics’ initial launch” (“Michelle Phan”, 2015).

Alix Earle

Alix Earle is a notable American social media personality and content creator, often dubbed as “TikTok’s newest it girl” (McKenzie, 2023). Earle graduated from the University of Miami, where she graduated in May of 2023 with a degree in marketing (“Alix Earle”, n.d.).

Earle's journey into the limelight began in February 2020, during her freshman year at the University of Miami, when she began posting content on TikTok (“Alix Earle”, n.d.). She experienced a surge in popularity in the summer of 2022 due to a video addressing her struggles with acne, which led to a significant increase in her following. Following this, Earle's "Get Ready with Me" (GRWM) videos, where she discussed her daily life while showcasing herself getting ready, contributed to her gaining millions of new followers on TikTok (“Alix Earle”, n.d.). As of March 5th, 2023, she has over 6.5 million followers on the platform (Earle, n.d.)

Similar to Michelle Phan, Alix Earle's was also named in the Forbes 30 Under 30 list ("Alix Earle", n.d.). She's known for the "Alix Earle effect," where products she endorses often sell out rapidly due to her large and dedicated fanbase and the considerable influence she wields on consumer behaviour (Lucas, 2023).

James Charles

James Charles Dickinson, known on his social media platforms as James Charles, is an American internet personality, beauty YouTuber, and makeup artist from New York ("James Charles". n.d.). He gained prominence in the beauty industry and on social media platforms for his makeup tutorials and beauty-related content. In 2016, he made a viral post on Twitter (now "X") where he showed himself retaking his senior yearbook photos with a ring light so that the highlighter applied to his face would stand out more (Charles, 2016).

After his viral post, Charles (aged 17) was hired by CoverGirl in 2016 and was the first-ever male spokesperson for the brand ("James Charles", n.d.). This garnered significant media attention, and his viral post along with his title as the first-ever male CoverGirl made him gain prominence and kick-started his career in beauty influencing ("James Charles", n.d.). Initially gaining prominence on his YouTube channel, Charles' YouTube channel currently holds nearly 24 million subscribers (Charles, n.d.a).

From April to July 2021, Charles took a brief hiatus from social media after facing allegations of grooming and sexual misconduct with minors ("James Charles", n.d.). Following these allegations, makeup brand Morphe cut ties with Charles, and his channel was temporarily demonetized by YouTube. In July of 2021, Charles did an interview with Cosmopolitan and posted a YouTube video denying the allegations ("James Charles", n.d.).

Despite the controversy faced by Charles in 2021, he continues to post beauty content online. Though he had his origins on YouTube, Charles (like many beauty influencers) now posts most frequently TikTok, where he has 38.5 million followers (Charles, n.d.b). He was also named the highest-earning beauty influencer on TikTok in 2022 (Carrara, 2022). Charles continues to collaborate with brands and is currently releasing his own beauty line, Painted, which he frequently advertises on TikTok.

Overview:

The above influencers were chosen to be a part of my analysis because of their unique status and places within the beauty industry. Earle is included because of her title as the latest TikTok “it girl”, Charles because he is the highest-earning beauty influencer on TikTok, and Phan because of her status as the “first ever” beauty guru (Neoreach, 2022). By this unique selection, my analysis can encompass: the current facets of beauty influencing including status and money, as well as the origins of beauty influencing.

The videos selected for each individual were done so through a selection process, where the beauty influencers content was evaluated for its relevancy to my area of study. As such, the following videos (each linked before its analysis) were selected:

Alix Earle:

Exhibit A: “Updated Makeup Routine”

Link:

https://www.tiktok.com/@alixearle/video/7324533656444325163?_r=1&_t=8kw9G1gMprJ

In this video, Earle shows her updated makeup routine, including the names of the products being used as well as providing some direction on how the products are applied. It is worth noting that this video is different from many of her other “Get Ready with Me” videos as

the other videos often focus on her talking or telling a story, with her makeup application happening in the background as she talks about another topic. This difference may be attributed to the fact that this video is sponsored, which is inferred from the fact that the video description reads “All [products] linked in my shop in my bio” (Earle, 2024a). This makes it apparent that Earle is sponsored by these products or is in some way monetizing the usage and linking of each of the products. This is especially clear because her non-sponsored videos do not link product names, and they often do not even mention the name of the product or brand being used.

Furthermore, this video heavily relies on the names of products and has brief pauses in between to either rave about the product or provide some short makeup tips. Further evidence that the video is sponsored or affiliated with these products is the fact that she even gives the name and brand of certain products, including the makeup brushes being used. (Earle, 2024a).

Contrarily, Earle does not provide the brand name of the eyelash curler being used, which is seemingly because that product is not sponsored. What further raises questions about this is the fact that Earle goes on to emphasize the importance of using a lash curler to “really get in there” as it “makes the biggest difference” (Earle, 2024a, 1:03). For a product that is the *most* important in her beauty routine, there is no clear reason (other than a lack of sponsorship) to break the stylistic pattern of the video and not disclose the product information.

This video and its caption do not explicitly disclose any sponsorship or product affiliation. This is an example of influencer non-disclosure, in which case celebrities or influencers may fail to disclose brand sponsorship or endorsement for fear of appearing untrustworthy to their audience (Lee et al., 2021). This is apparent because as will be discussed in the second video of Earle’s that is being analyzed, Earle relies heavily on a perceived

connection with her audience, in which she creates a “relatable” feel via talking to her audience as though they are her friends, and by often responding to comments that are left under her posts.

This can also be highlighted in the fact that her TikTok bio reads “a hot mess” (“Earle, 2016). This is a clear attempt to be relatable to her viewer, as “a person described as a hot mess is attractive but just barely keeping it together” (Dictionary.com, 2018). Furthermore, Earle’s attempts at relatability and engagement with her audience act as an example of relational labour, which is often performed by influencers as a form of self-branding (Glatt, 2023). This is a perfect example of the persona used by Earle. While she attempts to be relatable to her viewer through storytelling in her videos and “keeping it real” with her audience, she maintains many hegemonic beauty ideals, which she perpetrates visually through her content. For example, Earle’s appearance acts as an example of the hegemonic beauty standard, as she is a white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes (Jones, 2011). Alix further emphasizes these beauty standards as she often shows videos of herself getting her hair dyed blonde, and she applies the “blue eyes” TikTok filter video to nearly all of her videos, including the video being currently analyzed (Earle, 2024a). The following video being analyzed will delve more into Earle’s marketing tactic of relatability.

Exhibit B: “GRWM for a Girls’ Night out”

Link:

https://www.tiktok.com/@alixearle/video/7335224333620563243?_r=1&_t=8kw9IrZxzUM

This video is a sponsored video for the brand OLEHENRIKSEN, a Scandinavian skincare brand under beauty giant LVMH group (OLEHENRIKSEN, n.d.). Unlike the previous video, Earle does disclose the sponsorship; however, she avoids the word “ad” or “sponsored”, and discloses it with #Olepartner and she tags the brand in the description (Earle, 2024b).

Furthermore, instead of just appearing on her profile, this video appears as a sponsored ad on TikTok, and shows up as an interruption while users are scrolling.

In this video, Earle is advertising lip-glosses for the brand (Earle, 2024b). This video utilizes Earle's signature style of storytelling or talking during a video while she does her makeup, presumably in the background. Earle interrupts herself in the video to rave about the lip-glosses, including the way they look and their scent (Earle, 2024b).

She opens the video by discussing that she is going to a sushi spot with her friends, which is "cheap, it's chill, I'm gonna (sic) wear my sweatpants there. The only reason I'm doing makeup is cause (sic) I wanna (sic) try out these new lip products that I got (Earle, 2024b, 0:07). Evidently, she is making this video in the style of a regular story telling video, and she goes out of her way to make the sponsorship look organic. Instead of explaining that the lip products were sponsored or sent to her, she uses the phrase "[lip products] that I got" (Earle, 2024b, 0:10).

Using the term "got" can insinuate that she purchased these products herself, which is not the case. This is another example of her attempting to minimize disclosure to appear organic to her audience. This is in line with the idea described by Lee et al. that choice of wording can have an effect on the way that consumers perceive the advertisement. According to Lee et al (2021), native advertisement, which matches the form of media it exists in, is often perceived very positively when compared to other forms of advertisement. This is further emphasized by the fact that in the video, Earle portrays the products as if this is her first interaction with them, and claims to provide a (very positive) "first impression" of the products.

Earle's method of advertisement reinforces hegemonic ideals of feminine beauty by way of aligning spending habits with feminine identity (Gill, 2007). This is apparent because, while doing one's makeup is closely aligned with femininity, Earle even states in the video that the

“only reason” she is doing her makeup is to “try out the new lip products” (Earle, 2024b, 0:07). This quote implies that doing one’s makeup (which is already a facet of feminine identity) is an avenue for trying new products, and therefore an avenue for consumerism (Gill, 2007).

James Charles

Exhibit C: Painted Sponge Ad

Link:

https://www.tiktok.com/@jamescharles/video/7330730900608552235?_r=1&_t=8kw6ySkCBvC

This first video by Charles is very short, but very effectively portrays his approach to marketing, his target audience, and the ways that he enforces hegemonic ideals of beauty onto women.

While Charles identifies as male, he is also openly gay, and he works within an industry that predominantly sells to women (“James Charles”. n.d.). As was expressed by Gill, gay men within fashion and beauty media often occupy an “explicitly feminized position, offering advice based on their cultural capital as wealthy, successful, middle-class and, above all, stylish” (Gill, 2007 p.157). In this sense, gay men can be placed in a position of authority over fashion and beauty knowledge, which is a trope that Charles often uses for his own personal gain.

In this TikTok video, Charles is wearing a bathrobe and doing his makeup with a beauty sponge from his own cosmetic company, Painted. The caption of the video reads “when you’re getting ready together and your bestie pulls out her tiny crusty 3 year old (sic) beauty blender” (Charles, 2024a). He mouths the words “Damn... I’m sorry” using a popular TikTok audio which has since been removed from the video (Charles, 2024a, 0:02). While he is mouthing these words, he acts shocked at his friend’s use of a “crusty” beauty blender (Charles, 2024a). He then picks up his friend’s beauty blender and visually compares it to his much larger (and seemingly

fresher, better and more acceptable) beauty sponge, rolls his eyes at his friend and her beauty blender, and then puts hers down with a disgusted and judgmental facial expression while mouthing “I’m sorry” (Charles, 2024a, 0:06).

The wording used by Charles for the caption on the video is very selective and important to note. Charles goes out of his way to refer to this friend as a woman by using the term “her”, as opposed to using a gender neutral or masculine term to refer to said friend. It is very evident that Charles hopes to reach a majority female audience as his tagline with opening his YouTube videos is “Hi sisters” (Tilchen and Stivale, 2020). Furthermore, the fact that he explicitly uses the phrase “sisters” and not another feminine identifier (such as girls) acts as an example of relational labour. This is because using the phrase “sisters” insinuates a strong personal relationship (ie. that of one’s sister or sibling). This wording can be used to create a form of trust between himself and his audience, who are presumably meant to create a parasocial relationship with Charles (Escalas and Bettman, 2017).

The female audience that Charles attempts to reach in this video is being vicariously shamed for using an older beauty blender as opposed to his product. This acts as an example of enforcing feminine beauty ideals by way of consumption as a facet of feminine identity (Gill, 2007). According to Charles’ video, the antidote to the shame or judgement faced by a woman with an old makeup product is to replace it by purchasing a new one that was created by him, as someone who has authority over makeup and beauty knowledge. While it may be argued that Charles is a source of counter-hegemony because he is a man who wears makeup, it is important to understand how he enforces hegemonic beauty ideals for the women who watch his videos.

Michelle Phan

Exhibit D: Sailor Moon Transformation

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYfG29dzIuA>

This video, entitled *Sailor Moon Transformation* on Michelle Phan’s YouTube Channel is a reupload with a different audio than was originally used, most likely due to music copyright issues (Phan, 2009). Because the audio is imperative to my analysis, I am using the original video with the original audio, which was reuploaded to YouTube by a third party (missybeebee, 2016).

In this video, Phan provides a makeup and fashion tutorial to look like Serena or Sailor Moon, the main character from the popular Japanese manga and anime series *Sailor Moon* (“Sailor Moon”, n.d.). It is important to note that in the title, Phan uses the word “transformation” as opposed to “tutorial” (Phan, 2009). This phrasing can be used to insinuate that instead of simply appearing or looking like sailor moon via makeup application or wearing a costume, the viewer can instead embody sailor moon via a transformation that is deeper than the exterior makeover. This insinuation of embodiment can also be seen when Phan instructs the viewer to wear “anime contact lenses” that “not only make your eyes appear bigger, but reflect more light, like *real* anime eyes!” (missybeebee, 2009, 0:55). In the second step, labelled “clear bright skin”, Michelle states that she uses “IQQU acne serum every time” (Phan, 2009, 1:05). It is worth noting that IQQU is a cosmetic brand created by Phan, which is no longer in business and has largely been removed from the internet. However, I was able to find filings on the FDA’s official website *dailymed*, highlighting that none of the products (including the acne serum advertised in this video) were approved by the FDA or “found by the FDA to be safe and effective” (DailyMed, 2010). While there are no official sources for the reason behind the brand’s

closure, many blogs and opinion websites cite the fact that Phan made false claims about the Brands status as “FDA approved” as the reason for its discontinuation (mishbunny, 2015).

After completing the makeup tutorial portion of the video, Phan inserts a “Transformation time” segment showing herself holding up props from the sailor moon costume, and completing her look with matching gloves and a headband. Phan edits this portion of the video using special effects that emulate the “transformations” in Sailor Moon, segments of the animated series in which the main character of the series and her friends transform from regular girls into superheroes (“Transformations, n.d.). Along with visual effects, Phan uses sound effects to emulate the animated series.

Phan completes this segment with a monologue taken from the animated series, stating “I am sailor moon, the champion of justice” (missybeebee, 2016, 7:31). This statement furthers the idea of the “transformation” into sailor moon. Rather than simply appearing like the character, Phan is solidifying that this external transformation can lead to an internal one, in which the viewer can feel an internal shift after applying beauty products to emulate Sailor Moon. At the end of her tutorial, she uses her signature sign off of “good luck” (missybeebee, 2016, 7:59). However, she ends this video in a way that is unusual to her typical video endings by inserting a monologue, entitled “My Message” (missybeebee, 2016, 8:10).

The following is a quote from the monologue: “Have you ever dressed up like a superhero when you were a child? You’d wear the towel as a cape and felt so strong, nothing could hurt you; you were invincible. Makeup is similar to a superhero costume; after you wear it, you feel confident and strong; sometimes it’s your alter ego... whatever it is, you feel stronger” (missybeebee, 2016, 8:13). This monologue explains a lot of why Michelle portrays this video as a “transformation” as opposed to a tutorial. Here, Phan solidifies her para social relationship with

her viewer by referring to a common childhood memory to relate to the viewer, creating a form of commonality. Not only does Phan create a para social conversation, but the context of this monologue is to appeal to one's emotions; specifically, emotions surrounding one's lack of confidence, or a need for strength. According to Escalus and Bettman (2017), low self-esteem is an indicator that makes one more likely to form a para social relationship with a celebrity and is an indicator of a high need to belong (NTB). Accordingly, "high NTB consumers may look to celebrities for meaningful cues about how products and brands can meet affiliation needs" (Escalus & Bettman, 2017).

Not only does Phan appeal to high NTB viewers with this monologue, but her idea that makeup is similar to a superhero costume because it makes one "feel confident and strong" is an example of how post-feminist culture rebrands the use of makeup and beauty products as a form of feminine empowerment (Gill, 2007). Statements such as this, that makeup can make one feel "strong" or "confident" are examples of how the labour of beauty that is placed upon women is appropriated into a form of self-care (Gill, 2007). Not only is Phan perpetuating this myth about beauty as self-care to enforce hegemonic ideals of femininity and beauty, but she is also specifically spreading this message to young women.

According to a 2024 Social Media marketing report, young women from the ages of 16-24 spend the most time on social media, with nearly 30% of females within that age group following social media influencers (Geysler, 2024). This monologue serves as an example of how fashion, cosmetics and beauty are not only central to femininity, but beauty media also makes them central to adolescent femininity (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 26).

Another common theme in Phan's videos is the usage of Lancôme products in nearly all of her earlier videos. In 2010, the brand Lancôme (owned by makeup giant L'Oréal) announced

Phan as their “official video makeup artist” (The Independent, 2010). However, the influencer’s relationship with the brand appears to go farther back than 2010, as the brand is used and mentioned in several videos before she was officially named as the brand’s makeup artist (Phan, 2009). Furthermore, Phan does not explicitly disclose the sponsorship or advertisement in her videos, an example of the non-disclosure often partaken by influencers (Lee et al., 2021). This is made evident in the fact Phan does not disclose the sponsorship in the video being analyzed. Furthermore, amongst all of the products being used in the video, Phan only discloses the brand name for two of the products, including a Lancôme eyebrow pencil (missybeebee, 2016, 1:08).

In conclusion, this chapter has analyzed content from all three of the beauty influencers being focused on in this paper. It has also provided a brief biography and background knowledge/context on Alix Earle, James Charles and Michelle Phan. Though each of these influencers have different backgrounds and seemingly different approaches to their marketing and content, they have many overlapping approaches in the ways in which they appeal to and reinforce feminine hegemonic beauty ideals to market and sell products. Alix Earle’s approach centers on implicit ideals of femininity; this heavily centers on the fact that she is someone whose appearance fits hegemonic ideals of beauty, by way that she is a thin, white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. Earle’s content also enforces and thrives off her reinforcement of the link between spending habits and feminine identity (Gill, 2007). Charles’ approach to his content is unique in the sense that he is not a woman. However, he is in a unique position as a gay man, as they are often viewed as extremely knowledgeable in style, and have a sense of authority in fashion and beauty (Gill, 2007). Of all three influencers, Charles is the most direct with his enforcement of ideals about femininity; though Earle and Phan have more coded and implicit messages, Charles’ content (such as the Painted beauty sponge ad) uses shame and judgement to

sell products. The analysis of Michelle Phan's content is integral to this thesis due to her unique position as the first beauty guru (Neoreach, 2022). As a trail blazer in beauty influencing, she also enforced hegemonic ideals of femininity and beauty. However, instead of directly enforcing beauty standards, Phan created a niche by instead focusing on makeup as a form of escapism and transformation, and a tool of feminine empowerment. While each of these unique influencers have seemingly unique approaches to their content, the messaging that they use to sell and justify consumption of beauty products has very common underlying themes.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

In researching select videos from Alix Earle, James Charles, and Michelle Phan, I have demonstrated how these influencers enforce hegemonic ideals of beauty, and how this intersects with corporate sponsorship and product placement. The analysis outlined each influencers' individual marketing and content and the different facets of feminine identity they use to appeal to their audiences and endorse beauty products. One clear link between the similarities of each influencers' content is the formation of parasocial relationships by way of relational labour. Each content creator has a unique approach to how they build a "relationship" with their audience. With Alix Earle, this can be seen in the fact that her videos are made very casually, and in a way that mimics how one would speak with their friends or people that they know in real life. Her usage of very casual language and spelling in both her speech and her captions is an example of this. For James Charles, his use of emotional labour is made apparent in his choice of speech when he "speaks" with his audience. The fact that his tagline is "hey sisters" again mimics a close personal relationship. For Michelle Phan, the emotional labour is not done so much through casualness in speech, but rather through emotionally vulnerability and relatability, and appealing to high need to belong consumers. Though their methods and appeals are different, the usage of emotional labour is pervasive in each creator's content.

Even though each influencer's content is seemingly different, they have very similar marketing tactics and ultimately hold the same goals of relating to viewers, appealing to their audience to build their fan base, and selling products via advertisement in their content. This level of sameness acts as an example of Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry. The culture industry argues that mass-produced content has a level of sameness due to the conglomerates that

own and fund mass media (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/2002). However, this can also be applied to the content of each influencer, with the makeup and beauty conglomerates that fund their sponsorship creating a level of similarity amongst each influencer's video, as the content of their videos have the same goal of product endorsement. The beauty industry is currently owned and operated by a few large conglomerates, that own most major brands. For example, Michelle Phan worked very closely with Lancôme, and the video of hers that was analysed in this paper had a seemingly undisclosed Lancôme product placement. Lancôme Paris is owned by L'Oréal, which is the beauty conglomerate with the most brands under it (Willet-Wei & Gould, 2017). Furthermore, Alix Earle's video *GRWM for a Girl's Night out* is sponsored by the brand OLEHENRIKSEN, which in 2011 was acquired by LVMH group (OLEHENRIKSEN, n.d.). LVMH group is currently "the world's leading luxury products group" (Sternberg, 2024). This pressure to sell the sponsored products may be one of the reasons that there are overlapping themes in their content and marketing style, such as those discussed above of parasocial relationships, emotional labour, and appeal to and enforcement of hegemony of femininity and beauty.

In the James Charles video analyzed, he advertises his own brand using similar methods and themes as Earle and Phan do to sell products from the major conglomerates. It is worth noting that while Charles is currently working on the release of his own makeup brand, most of his success and career was built off of advertising and collaborating with other companies, typically those owned by the major beauty conglomerates. For example, Charles made a breakthrough in his career because he was selected by the brand CoverGirl as their ambassador ("James Charles", n.d.). CoverGirl, a well-known and widely distributed makeup brand, is owned by the conglomerate Coty (Willet-Wei & Gould, 2017). Covergirl is largely considered a

“fan favourite” as a brand, and Charles’ association with the brand acts as one of many examples of his affiliation with beauty conglomerates. Accordingly, it is reasonable that the conglomerate influence shaped Charles’ style of fan appeal and product selling, and he is now continuously utilizing those same or similar tactics to sell products from his new makeup brand.

By looking at the demographics of the executive team of each major beauty conglomerate, it is apparent that these conglomerates echo traditional power structures, as majority of these conglomerates are owned and operated by affluent, seemingly white men (Willet-Wei & Gould, 2017). Therefore, these influencers are paid by these power structures (dominated by mostly affluent, white men), which continues to enforce hegemony. The demographic that makes up the owners and operators of these conglomerates, as a group that already holds a large amount of power, has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and enforcing power structure through the usage of media and culturally enforced norms. A parallel can also be drawn between the (mostly male) CEOs of these conglomerates as “above-the-line” agents, who use the labour and content creation of the (mostly female) “below-the-line” influencers (Mayer et al., 2009).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed select videos from the TikTok and YouTube profiles of Michelle Phan, James Charles, and Alix Earle. Each of these influencers have different backgrounds and seemingly different approaches to their content and marketing styles. However, each influencer ultimately shares the goal of forming a connection with their audience to endorse beauty products. These beauty products are often owned and operated by major beauty conglomerates, and have executive teams that often echo notions of power in our society by way of largely being white, affluent men (Van Zoonen, 1994) (Willet-Wei & Gould, 2017).

The content created by these influencers enforces hegemonic ideals of femininity and beauty. These influencers enforce cultural hegemony via several different approaches, which go beyond just portraying and appealing to beauty standards. These methods include the relational labour of building pseudo relationships with their audiences and self-branding, non-disclosure and impartial endorsement of sponsorships, linking spending habits to feminine identity, and appealing to high need-to-belong consumers (Baym, 2018) (Cop et al, 2023) (Lee et al., 2021) (Glatt, 2023) (Gill, 2007) (Escalus & Bettman, 2017). These influencers do not stand alone in their enforcement of hegemony, as it is something that trickles down from the multi-billion beauty industry that they are a part of, and makes its way into their content.

These methods employed by these influencers in the creation of their sponsored content were analyzed in this paper via a textual analysis, using the lens of feminist media theory by Liesbet van Zoonen (1994). This lens helped apply and understand the intersections between influencer content and many applicable theories, including cultural hegemony, the culture industry, below-the-line labour, and relational labour, as well as advertising methods. This thesis has explored how the cultural hegemony enforced by the beauty industry manifests in and intersects with beauty influencer content.

Social media advertising has revolutionized advertising across virtually all industries, including the beauty industry. This is largely because of the relatively new emergence of beauty influencers, who sell sponsored content by way of relating with their audience. Beauty influencers are in a unique position, as they are subject to hegemony, but they are also enforcers and agents of it. Beauty influencer content has genuine effects on consumer behaviour, and shapes the spending habits of the young, female age group that makes up the target audience of beauty influencer content (Kim, 2023) (Geysler, 2024). The influence and power of these beauty

gurus on consumer habits acts as a stark reminder of how feminine identity is so deeply intertwined with beauty, and how beauty and femininity are enforced by one's spending habits.

It is imperative to research and understand these intersections as the line between advertising and social media content begins to blur. As advertising tactics adapt and evolve to become less obvious and more (seemingly) organic, they also evade the negative connotations of traditional advertising. The covert style of advertisement employed by influencers means that the knowledge of sponsorship can more easily evade the attention of their audience. This in turn makes the audience more trusting of the influencer, and makes them more likely to purchase the sponsored products that are being advertised (Lee et al., 2021). Ultimately, this form of advertising relies on its audience's ignorance of understanding the employed tactics. Research such as this, which explores the intersections between the people one follows on social media and how they are shaping their spending habits is an important piece of being an informed consumer. While this knowledge does not mean that one can completely evade sponsored content or the pervasive hegemony of the beauty industry, it can make for a more informed and media-literate consumer. I hope that this research can help contribute to this understanding and literacy, and ultimately to the future study of the relatively new field of social media and influencer communication.

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