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"Being Myself Paid Off:" Blackness, Feminized Labor, and Authenticity in Black Beauty and Lifestyle Content on Youtube

Melissa Monier
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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“BEING MYSELF PAID OFF:”
BLACKNESS, FEMINIZED LABOR, AND AUTHENTICITY IN BLACK BEAUTY AND
LIFESTYLE CONTENT ON YOUTUBE

by

Melissa Monier

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

“BEING MYSELF PAID OFF:” BLACKNESS, FEMINIZED LABOR, AND AUTHENTICITY IN BLACK BEAUTY AND LIFESTYLE CONTENT ON YOUTUBE

by

Melissa Monier

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021
Under the Supervision of Professor Elana Levine

My thesis centers Black women in conversations of digital feminized and aspirational labor online, reframing prior scholarship that has generally identified digital content creators as young, white, female, cisgender, and upper class. I use an intersectional, Black cyberfeminist approach to better understand how race and gender impact digital feminized and aspirational labor. In a 2015 study of fashion bloggers, Brooke Duffy and Emily Hund identified three elements of entrepreneurial femininity: discourses of “the destiny of passionate work,” staging “the Glam Life,” and sharing “carefully curated” intimate details of one’s personal life on social media. My thesis applies these three elements of entrepreneurial femininity as a framework to explore how they shape content created by Nigerian-American vlogger Jackie Aina. I analyze beauty and lifestyle videos and vlogs posted to Aina’s channel from 2018-2021, as well as popular press interviews and posts from Aina’s personal websites and social media to better understand how she frames the labor she engages in. Focusing on labor and the discourse of “passionate work,” I argue that Aina performs multiple levels of paid and unpaid labor by developing a distinct persona and branded identity, building affective communities with her audience, and navigating racism online.

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To my fiancé, Jacob (who will be my husband after this is published),
to my brilliant classmates and the wonderful faculty at UWM who have supported me,
challenged me, and helped me become a better academic
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Project Description

“Welcome back to my channel, it’s your girl Jackie Aina!” Nigerian-American YouTuber Jackie Aina opens every video with the same line, followed by a theme song she sings herself. Aina started her YouTube channel in 2009.¹ Today, her channel has over 3.59 million subscribers and her videos have over 367 million total views.² She has been on the cover of *Essence* magazine and was the first YouTuber to be recognized at the NAACP Image Awards, receiving the first-ever “YouTuber of the Year” award.³ Aina’s popularity can be attributed to many factors: her down-to-earth, authentic, and trustworthy persona, the quality of her content, and the fact that she is a hypervisible dark-skinned Black woman in digital spaces that assume white femininity. This thesis is an analysis of Jackie Aina as a prominent figure in the beauty community on YouTube as well as her content. Black women lifestyle and beauty vloggers are the focus for my thesis project, as I believe they offer valuable insight into the how race and gender intersect in digital feminized spaces.

Aina is often referred to as a lifestyle/beauty vlogger or YouTuber. This is because her channel primarily consists of lifestyle and beauty product hauls, reviews, and tutorials, referred to throughout this project as “content videos.”⁴ But Aina also incorporates lifestyle content into her channel, allowing audiences to get a more intimate look at her everyday life. Lifestyle

¹ Jackie Aina and Lindsay Schallon, “Jackie Aina Is Changing the Beauty Industry, One Product at a Time,” *Glamour*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.glamour.com/story/jackie-aina-too-faced>.

² “Jackie Aina: About,” YouTube, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/makeupgameonpoint/about>.

³ Shea Simmons, “Jackie Aina Is The NAACP YouTuber Of The Year & It’s A Major Moment For The Activist Guru,” *Bustle*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/jackie-aina-is-the-naacp-youtuber-of-the-year-its-a-major-moment-for-the-activist-guru-7912421>; Marjon Carlos, “Glow Girl! Jackie Aina is Taking the Beauty Industry by Storm,” *Essence*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.essence.com/feature/jackie-aina-essence-june-digital-cover-story/>.

⁴ Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, “‘I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend’: The Role of Intimacy in the Celebrification of Beauty Vloggers,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 310-312.

content borrows elements from lifestyle television and reality TV.⁵ Vlogs (the combination of videos and blogs) document “everyday” experiences in a video diary format, allowing audiences to follow a creator through their daily routines. While early YouTube had niche content categories, more recently, beauty, fashion, and lifestyle content have converged as vloggers must develop a distinct personal brand and expand their content across multiple social media platforms. To be successful, vloggers must merge their public and private lives into their branded identities or personas, sharing intimate details of their personal lives with their audiences. A balance of highly edited content videos and more personal vlogs shapes the vlogger persona as more approachable or authentic. This is a form of feminized labor, establishing intimacy and authenticity as a part of a vlogger’s personal brand.⁶ It is easy to trace the neoliberal mythos of “hard work” and the concept of “aspirational labor” in lifestyle content on YouTube. Coined by Brooke Erin Duffy, aspirational labor is affective, gendered, and is based on the principle that being able to “do what you love” is not actually work. Aspirational labor is often underpaid or uncompensated and minimized by rhetorics of passion; it is work feminized digital laborers engage in because they believe it will pay off in the long run.⁷ According to Duffy, aspirational labor has three components: authenticity, affective relationships, and entrepreneurial brand devotion.⁸ While digital creative industries offer flexibility and creativity, Duffy asserts that

⁵ Laurie Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁶ Laura Horak, “Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 572-585; Berryman and Kavka, 318; Brooke Erin Duffy and Elizabeth Wissinger, “Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and ‘Just Being Me,’” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 4663; Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, second edition, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 80.

⁷ Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017); Brooke Erin Duffy, “The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2016): 441–457.

⁸ Duffy, “The Romance of Work,” 443-447.

despite this discourse of production, feminized workers must continue to participate in consumption.⁹

For vloggers, aspirational labor underscores all of the time-intensive physical and emotional labor that the position entails, namely through maintaining her online brands and her digital persona. Aina's branded identity, as well as her videos, can be viewed as commodities. According to Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, successful vloggers turn intimacy into a commodity. Intimacy established through content videos and vlogs strengthens affective bonds between the vlogger and their audience while simultaneously promoting sponsored content, products they personally produce, and ultimately their personal brands/themselves.¹⁰ Aina has been celebrated as an activist for speaking out against racism in the online beauty community, incorporating her experience as a dark-skinned Black woman in the industry. Aina has created a distinct branded identity that carries across YouTube to other social media platforms. Along with brand partnerships, Aina has her own lifestyle brand, Forvr Mood, that sells designer candles and other luxury self-care items. The uncompensated affective labor Aina engages in through maintaining a genuine and inviting persona, building familiarity with her audience, and interacting with followers online is in addition to the manual labor of producing branded content and managing a company.¹¹ Building an authentic and trustworthy persona, as well as sharing personal details of her life online not only strengthens Aina's bond with her audience, but is also necessary for her to reach more viewers and be successful online.

As a vlogger, Aina engages in multiple forms of labor, including filming and editing content, negotiating brand deals and partnerships, and managing her businesses. While Aina is

⁹ Duffy "The Romance of Work," 443.

¹⁰ Berryman and Kavka, 318.

¹¹ Berryman and Kavka, 318.

compensated for this labor through ad revenue on her videos, brand partnerships and sponsorships, and her branded product sales, there is work that goes on behind the scenes that is never fully compensated. As I discuss in the following chapters, Aina engages in additional labor that involves building and maintaining affective communities online. This is achieved through her engagement with her audience as well as by sharing intimate details of her life and filming herself in vulnerable moments, which can take an emotional toll. Interestingly, this labor is minimized in Aina's content because she must continue to appear aspirational. Furthermore, there are additional expectations of Aina, given her status as a prominent Black beauty vlogger and as a Black woman, that require her to engage in even more uncompensated labor. Because of her identity, she is constantly called upon to speak out about racial issues and must also navigate hostile platforms and harassment online. This thesis aims to illuminate the significant gaps in discussions surrounding digital content creators and feminized labor that render Black women, their labor, and their contributions invisible.

In prior scholarship on digital feminized labor, creators are generally identified as being young, white, female, cisgender, and upper class.¹² This project takes an intersectional, Black cyberfeminist approach to better understand how race and gender impact digital feminized and aspirational labor. In a 2015 study on fashion bloggers, Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund identify three elements of entrepreneurial femininity: discourses of “the destiny of passionate work,” staging “the Glam Life,” and sharing “carefully curated” intimate details of one's personal life on social media.¹³ My thesis adopts Duffy and Hund's study as a framework to explore how the components of entrepreneurial femininity shape Aina's content. Focusing on

¹² Duffy, “The Romance of Work,” 441—457; Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*; Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, “‘Having It All’ on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers,” *Social Media and Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 4.

¹³ Duffy and Hund.

labor and the discourse of “passionate work,” I argue that Aina performs multiple levels of paid and unpaid labor by developing a distinct persona and branded identity, building affective communities with her audience, and navigating racism online.

Literature Review

In order to study Black beauty vloggers and their labor, I am drawing on a number of bodies of scholarship, including intersectional Black feminist and cyberfeminist theory, critical media studies, and internet/digital media studies. This research is grouped into four main themes: (1) lifestyle media, (2) race and racism online, (3) Blackness, representation, and beauty culture, and (4) digital feminized labor. In the literature review that follows, I begin by briefly introducing lifestyle media to explore how beauty and lifestyle content videos incorporate many of the same elements as lifestyle television. I then discuss YouTube as a platform as well as its vulnerabilities that place Black women in a precarious state of hypervisibility and subject them to compounded levels of harassment based on their racial and gender identities. I later explore how Black women use digital space to build community and engage in discourse that challenges hegemonic beauty standards. I conclude with an exploration of digital feminized labor and aspirational labor, connecting these ideas to post-feminist and neoliberal rhetoric that requires self-branding.

A Brief History of Lifestyle Media

According to Laurie Ouellette, lifestyle media is embedded with notions of self-making, neoliberal subjectivity, and post-identity discourse (post-race, post-feminist, etc.).¹⁴ Providing a brief background on lifestyle television allows for a better understanding of lifestyle and beauty content videos on YouTube. Lifestyle TV was introduced in the early 1950s with the adoption of

¹⁴ Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV*.

TVs into the home.¹⁵ Many shows were aimed at women and focused on domestic skills through topics like cooking, fitness, and even beauty and fashion. These themes remain prevalent in lifestyle and beauty content videos on YouTube, from “What I Eat in a Day” videos and at-home workouts (popularized by fitness vloggers like Chloe Ting, who has 19.5 million subscribers and promises a better body in a month), to beauty and fashion hauls, tutorials, and product reviews. Ouellette explains that lifestyle content today is less about the skill itself and more about self-expression, consumption, and entertainment. Lifestyle and beauty content videos on YouTube center consumption and commonly feature sponsored content in which the vlogger promotes a brand or product or integrates a product into their video. Affect is also an important component of lifestyle content. Many vloggers adopt elements from lifestyle television and other genres like soaps and reality TV to “evoke a sense of spatial closeness” and facilitate intimate bonds between themselves and their audiences.¹⁶ The emotional labor that vloggers perform on and off camera to create relationships with their audiences resembles the affective nature of lifestyle TV.

Berryman and Kavka outline the gendered history of vlogging, starting in the 1990s with camgirls “homecamming,” or recording themselves in domestic spaces.¹⁷ Additionally, lifestyle vlogging adopts elements from “confessional culture,” commonly found in reality TV.¹⁸ Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood contend that reality TV commodifies surveillance and offers “incitements for ‘ordinary’ people to perform their own self-awareness, self-work and ultimately self-transformation, operating as a technology of governmentality and making the self’s value

¹⁵ Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV*.

¹⁶ Berryman and Kavka, 312.

¹⁷ Berryman and Kavka, 311.

¹⁸ Berryman and Kavka, 311.

visible to others.”¹⁹ Lifestyle and beauty content videos on YouTube integrate surveillance and commodification to promote self-fashioning.²⁰ Through aspirational and digital feminized labor, the economy of surveillance becomes a mode of profitable self-expression. Surveillance has additional implications for Black women. The Black feminized body is already under intense scrutiny and has historically been marked as a commodity.²¹ The hypervisibility afforded by online spaces like YouTube allows Black women to build affective communities, but also leaves them more vulnerable to race and gender-based harassment. As I will explore in the next section, hegemonic beauty standards are reified in digital spaces. The historical relationship between Blackness and beauty is informed by a violent history of colonialism. Black vloggers create community on their channels, subvert Eurocentric beauty standards, and negotiate anti-racist beauty practices, which I argue is a form of activism and uncompensated labor that white vloggers do not engage in.

Race and Racism Online: Platforms, Affordances, and Vulnerabilities

YouTube’s affordances for interaction offer a space for connection and community-building. YouTube launched in 2005 with the slogan “Broadcast Yourself” and aimed to create a platform for televisual user-generated content outside of broadcast television.²² YouTube sought to attract “non-expert[s]” to share videos online and form communities by allowing users to upload and stream user-generated content while also serving as a social networking platform.²³ José van Dijck explains that YouTube popularized “video sharing,” which consists of watching

¹⁹ Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 4.

²⁰ Berryman and Kavka, 311.

²¹ Simone Browne, “B@anding Blackness: Biometric Technology and the Surveillance of Blackness,” in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 91.

²² José van Dijck, “The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media,” in *YouTube: The Intimate Connection between Television and Video Sharing*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 111.

²³ van Dijck, 110-114; Burgess and Green, 2-4.

and uploading videos, but also interacting through likes, comments and shares, as well as creatively responding to content by “archiving, editing, and mashing up videos,” just as previous sites like Flickr had done for photo sharing.²⁴ YouTube’s early slogan, and their desire to center the user as a participant, illustrates the platform’s goal of creating a participatory forum of creative “public self-expression” rather than simply a video repository.²⁵ With over two billion users (almost as many as Facebook) and over a billion hours of content being watched daily, YouTube continues to be viewed as a hub of user-generated content and independent media production.²⁶ Ellie Homant and Katherine Sender state that, “YouTube’s low barriers to entry and lack of overbearing regulation on content allows for increased ‘vernacular creativity’ and a wider array of representations.”²⁷ YouTube’s affordances are one of the key ways that it differs from legacy media like film or television.²⁸ As an interactive video-sharing platform, YouTube functions as a “technology of intimacy,” that facilitates affective bonds and fosters community.²⁹ YouTube’s interactivity enables creators and audiences to connect and communicate directly, which is essential for Black vloggers to build community online.

In Apryl Williams’ study of Black women on Twitter, she explains that “racialization mimics segregation that users likely encounter or live in offline.”³⁰ The internet is part of the social structure that created it. Safiya Umoja Noble states that “racism and sexism are part of the

²⁴ van Dijck, 115.

²⁵ Burgess and Green, 7; van Dijck, 115.

²⁶ Ben Gilbert, “YouTube Now Has over 1.8 Billion Users Every Month, within Spitting Distance of Facebook’s 2 Billion,” *Business Insider*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-user-statistics-2018-5>; YouTube, “YouTube in Numbers,” YouTube for Press, <https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/about/press/>.

²⁷ Ellie Homant and Katherine Sender, “Queer Immaterial Labor in Beauty Videos by LGBTQ-Identified YouTubers,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 5388.

²⁸ Aymar Jean Christian, *Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television* (New York, New York: NYU Press, 2018).

²⁹ Berryman and Kavka, 316; van Dijck.

³⁰ Apryl Williams, “On Thursdays We Watch *Scandal*: Communal Viewing and Black Twitter,” in *Digital Sociologies*, ed. Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillan Cottom (University of Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), 281.

architecture and language of technology” and Rena Bivens and Oliver L. Haimson describe the infrastructure of digital spaces as having oppressive cultural norms and values “baked” in.³¹ The most popular social media sites were not created by Black people, nor do they prioritize Black users. Williams contends that many in order to navigate digital platforms, Black social media users adopt, appropriate, and modify them to fit their needs.³² This is best exemplified through “Black Twitter,” which refers to the spaces marked by the Black cultural production that occurs on Twitter. According to Williams, Black Twitter is one of the most “powerful and unified” communities on social media, serving as a “forum for Blackness” outside of mainstream Twitter’s assumed whiteness.³³ Despite these strong pockets of community, online spaces can be extremely hostile for Black women who experience harassment based on their race *and* gender. These experiences are rarely questioned because of our cultural assumption that technology is neutral, leading us to view the internet as the “great equalizer” or an egalitarian space of equal access. We view instances of algorithmic bias and oppression as “glitches” in the system, without realizing that this violence continues because these systems remain unchecked.³⁴ Despite the barriers imposed by hostile online environments, Black women continue to find ways to carve out community. Kishonna Gray explains that Black women “have always utilized meditated platforms” to discuss their experiences and as a means of resistance.³⁵ Black women gather in digital spaces to connect with each other, build community, and combat negative

³¹ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 9; Rena Bivens Oliver L. Haimson, “Baking Gender into Social Media Design: How Platforms Shape Categories for Users and Advertisers,” *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016): 1.

³² Williams, 280.

³³ Williams, 275, 285-288.

³⁴ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 82.

³⁵ WPCC Editorial Board, “‘Intersectionality Went Viral’: Toxic Platforms, Distinctive Black Cyberfeminism and Fighting Misogynoir – An Interview with Kishonna Gray,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 15, no. 1 (2020): 71.

stereotypes.³⁶ Because Black women are one of the most “least protected” groups online, spaces where they can share their experiences and resist both racism and misogyny are vital.³⁷ Digital spaces privilege white techno-masculinity and do not offer protections for Black women as their needs and experiences are not central to the platforms’ design.³⁸ Thus, it is important to understand how online platforms afford safety to white male and incite violence towards marginalized groups like Black women.

For Black women, hypervisibility is extremely precarious. On one hand, it allows Black women to connect and find each other and to form new representations amidst problematic media and social stereotypes. On the other, it leaves Black women extremely vulnerable to online harassment and violence. Caitlin E. Lawson studied online spaces during the promotion of the 2016 *Ghostbusters* reboot with an all-female cast. While the white leads received sexist comments and harassment online, Black actress Leslie Jones received both racist and sexist comments. Her personal website was hacked and images of her were replaced with images of the gorilla Harambe. Jones was also doxed; information taken from her driver’s license and passport were shared online along with photos stolen from her iCloud account.³⁹ Doxing was a common tactic used in Gamergate, which was a response to women’s presence in historically male-dominated spaces like gaming.⁴⁰ This logic centers on the false mindset that white masculinity is now vulnerable and must be protected. The magnitude of violence Jones experienced was due to

³⁶ André Brock, Lynette Kvasny, and Kayla Hales, “Cultural Appropriations of Technical Capital: Black Women, Weblogs, and the Digital Divide,” *Information, Communication & Society* 13, no. 7 (2010): 1051.

³⁷ Feminista Jones, “We Have Had to Defend Ourselves Against Online Threats,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/08/03/how-to-crack-down-on-social-media-threats/we-have-had-to-defend-ourselves-against-online-threats>.

³⁸ Brock, “Cultural Appropriations of Technical Capital;” WPCB Editorial Board; Caitlin E. Lawson, “Platform Vulnerabilities: Harassment and Misogynoir in the Digital Attack on Leslie Jones.” *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 6 (2018): 818–33.

³⁹ Lawson, “Platform Vulnerabilities,” 819.

⁴⁰ Lawson, “Platform Vulnerabilities,” 827-28.

her intersecting identities as a Black woman. What's worse is that online spaces do not have systems in place to protect Black women and other vulnerable communities from harassment; thus rendering the violence invisible. This is one example of many which proves that platforms themselves cannot keep Black women safe. The solutions (telling Black women to simply log off, delete comments, or block perpetrators) are only band-aids on a larger social illness. To assume that these spaces are neutral and egalitarian only allows misogyny and racism to continue to run rampant.

In discussions of Black communities online, the concept of “homeplaces” appears frequently. Robin J. Phelps-Ward and Crystal T. Laura describe the “homeplace” as a place of “everyday existence,” but it also denotes a space with significant social, cultural, and political meaning as prescribed by its inhabitants.⁴¹ Richard Lofton and James Earl Davis describe homeplaces as spaces where “African Americans rehumanize themselves from the terror of Whiteness in their lives.”⁴² According to André Brock, social media communities serves a similar function for Black users to “reconstitute themselves as ‘people.’”⁴³ These “regenerative” discourses have happened in public spaces historically, although Black people were much more limited geographically.⁴⁴ Segregation and institutionalized racism have meant that Black communities have had to “make do with whatever geographic location they were allowed to occupy.”⁴⁵ Social media has become a space reclaimed for collective Black gathering that transcends geographical barriers. There is radical potential for such large congregations of Black

⁴¹ Robin J. Phelps-Ward and Crystal T. Laura, “Talking Back in Cyberspace: Self-Love, Hair Care, and Counternarratives in Black Adolescent Girls’ YouTube Vlogs,” *Gender and Education* 28, no. 6 (2016): 818.

⁴² Richard Lofton and James Earl Davis, “Toward a Black Habitus: African Americans Navigating Systemic Inequalities within Home, School, and Community,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 84, no. 3 (2015): 214–30.

⁴³ André Brock, “‘Who Do You Think You Are?’: Race, Representation, and Cultural Rhetorics in Online Spaces,” *Poroi* 6, no. 1 (July 2009): 17.

⁴⁴ Brock, “‘Who Do You Think You Are?’” 17, 33.

⁴⁵ Brock, “‘Who Do You Think You Are?’” 33.

folks in public and digital spaces, especially as the Black community has been historically and purposefully separated and punished for attempts to gather. For Black women, conversations about self-care, and would have happened in beauty shops, which were also spaces of political organizing. Today, these conversations also happen on the vlogosphere through communities facilitated by Black vloggers.

Blackness, Representation, and Beauty Culture

Mainstream beauty culture is built upon hegemonic ideals of beauty: conventionally attractive, white, thin, cisgender women with long, straight hair and Eurocentric facial features. Janell Hobson explains that “beauty ideology is deeply rooted in cultural ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality – views that have supported the subjugation of women and people of African descent.”⁴⁶ Hegemonic beauty standards created a culture of assimilation for Black women dating back to slavery, where “adopting many White European traits was essential to survival,” Eurocentric physical features and cultural beauty standards denoted a higher social status.⁴⁷ Status based on a proximity to whiteness created a “color caste system” that favored lighter skinned Black women and created a hierarchy of hair textures, categorizing hair that was more coarse or thick as “bad.”⁴⁸ Cultural attitudes towards Black hair began to shift around the 1960s, marked by the “Black is Beautiful” movement. While Afros were viewed by mainstream culture as militant and dangerous, as these styles were worn by members of the Black Panther Party, they were celebrated in the Black community as a “symbol of African pride.”⁴⁹ This reclamation and celebration of Blackness coincided with the Black Power and Civil Rights

⁴⁶ Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2018), 143.

⁴⁷ Tracey Owens Patton, “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair,” *NWSA Journal*, Volume 18, no. 2 (2006): 28.

⁴⁸ Patton, 40.

⁴⁹ Cheikh Anta Babou, “Migration and Cultural Change: Money, ‘Caste,’ Gender, and Social Status among Senegalese Female Hair Braiders in the United States,” *Africa Today* 55, no. 2 (2008): 6.

movements in which natural hair was viewed as a rejection of white beauty standards by the Black community.⁵⁰

Negative connotations of Black hair are rooted in colonialism and racism and have shaped how Black hair is viewed today. Phelps-Ward and Laura state that Black hair, and Black beauty practices more broadly, are subject to symbolic violence.⁵¹ Black hair is associated with excess and is perceived as “too ethnic, threatening, or undesirable.”⁵² The choice to wear one’s hair “natural” (or without chemical treatments or excessive, often damaging, styling) is both personal and political. Black hair is engrossed in social mores of respectability; natural Black hair is viewed as unkempt, dirty, and unfit for professional settings like the workplace. From 2014 to 2017, US military branches rolled back regulations regarding appropriate hairstyles for servicewomen, permitting more natural styles like braids, twists, and locs.⁵³ Not only does this illustrate how Black women are targeted through strict and racist employment policies, but it also illustrates how Blackness is controlled by mores of patriotism and how military codes of uniformity default to whiteness. The sociocultural importance placed on the appearance of Black hair is imbued with respectability politics and dictated by Eurocentric standards of beauty and these norms permeate digital spaces. Noble discusses how a quick Google image search of the terms “professional hairstyles” results in white women with straight hair in updos while searching “unprofessional hairstyles” yields images of Black women with natural hair.⁵⁴ To

⁵⁰ Patton, 40; Babou, 6.

⁵¹ Phelps-Ward and Laura.

⁵² Babou, 6.

⁵³ Maya Rhodan, “U.S. Military Rolls Back Restrictions on Black Hairstyles,” *Time*, August 13, 2014, <https://time.com/3107647/military-black-hairstyles/>; Christopher Mele, “Army Lifts Ban on Dreadlocks, and Black Servicewomen Rejoice,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/us/army-ban-on-dreadlocks-black-servicewomen.html>.

⁵⁴ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 83; see figure 2.16.

combat these representations, especially in digital spaces, Black women gather on spaces like YouTube.

Vlogging creates space for Black women to renegotiate images and ideas of Blackness in hegemonic beauty culture. In a study of natural hair vloggers, Phelps-Ward and Laura contend that videos of Black girls documenting their experiences transitioning to natural hairstyles work to challenge hegemonic Eurocentric beauty standards.⁵⁵ Natural hair vloggers reframe narratives around Black hair. Their channels become spaces to unpack the historical, political connotations of Black hair and create space for dialogue around natural hair and hair textures. In videos showing how to style and care for natural hair, Black vloggers are decolonizing Blackness and engaging in acts of radical resistance by honoring their physical features. Latisha Neil and Afiya Mbilishaka explore how Black natural hair vloggers incorporate messages of self-care into their content.⁵⁶ While talking to their audiences, natural hair vloggers are also engaging in self-talk. Through this internal dialogue, they are forming their own definitions of “beauty” and disavowing problematic dominant ideologies. Black vloggers promote discourse both internally and between their audiences to challenge hegemonic beauty standards.

Black women must navigate both the patriarchy, which objectifies and sexualizes feminized bodies, and racism, which renders Black bodies as deviant in opposition to whiteness.⁵⁷ The compounding of sexism and racism directed at Black women in digital and visual culture has been defined by Moya Bailey as “misogynoir.”⁵⁸ Black women use digital spaces to “talk back”

⁵⁵ Phelps-Ward and Laura.

⁵⁶ Latisha Neil and Afiya Mbilishaka, “‘Hey Curlfriends!’: Hair Care and Self-Care Messaging on YouTube by Black Women Natural Hair Vloggers,” *Journal of Black Studies* 50, no. 2 (2019).

⁵⁷ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 92.

⁵⁸ Moya Bailey, “Misogynoir in Medical Media: On Caster Semenya and R. Kelly,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (2016): 2.

to oppressive systems and structures.⁵⁹ Phelps-Ward and Laura explain that the vloggers engage in open dialogue with their audiences through “advice sharing, advice seeking, results sharing, and storytelling.”⁶⁰ Black communities online have a level of ownership of the spaces they occupy as well as their narratives. Although much attention has been paid to specifically political spaces online in order to study digital activism, feminized spaces mostly occupied by Black women have received little attention.⁶¹ Feminized spaces such as gossip sites, fashion blogs, fan Twitter and Tumblr accounts, and YouTube channels are also places of activist work.⁶² On YouTube, there is additional labor performed by Black vloggers. During scandals involving racism in the beauty community, Lawson explains that Black YouTubers end up taking on the “riskier” labor by speaking out against racism.⁶³ Black women publicly speaking out against racism is not a new notion, but it is important to explore how these actions carry over to digital spaces. This emphasizes that the experiences of all vloggers are not the same and addresses how the intersections of race and gender complicate the experiences and labor of Black vloggers.

According to Brock, the internet “adds an interactive, discursive dimension to exterior renditions of Black identity and thus [enables] interior perspectives on Black identity to become part of the conversation.”⁶⁴ Digital spaces allow Black folks to gather and re-shape what it means to be Black in America and to unpack how Black identity has been shaped against standards of

⁵⁹ Catherine Knight Steele, “Signifyin’, Bitching, and Blogging: Black Women and Resistance Discourse Online,” in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*, ed. Brendesha M. Tynes and Safiya Umoja Noble (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 73—4; bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1988).

⁶⁰ Phelps-Ward and Laura, 816.

⁶¹ Steele.

⁶² Williams; Kristen J. Warner, “ABC’s Scandal and Black Women’s Fandom,” in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 34.

⁶³ Lawson, “Skin Deep,” 10.

⁶⁴ Brock, “Who Do You Think You Are?” 15–16.

whiteness.⁶⁵ Digital spaces prove to be invaluable sites for Black women’s activist work. According to Apryl Williams, Black Twitter discusses social justice six times more than white Twitter users.⁶⁶ Online, Black women are able to openly discuss, contest, and affirm facets of Black identity in spaces outside of dominant hegemonic media culture. Online platforms work to render Black women’s experiences visible, foster community, and mobilize activist work.⁶⁷ YouTube offers Black women space to tell their personal stories and shape their own narratives outside of dominant social discourse and media representations.⁶⁸ Black women vloggers are digital storytellers preserving Black cultural histories by fostering an understanding of the social and political history of Blackness and beauty standards by publicly embracing natural hair and Black features.⁶⁹ These spaces also create opportunities for discourse between creators and audiences, and allow Black women to engage in self-talk and to “talk back” to harmful stereotypes and representations while validating their own experiences and identities.⁷⁰ My thesis contributes to this scholarship by examining the precarious positioning of Black women in the beauty and lifestyle genres of YouTube, where success is typically granted through a proximity to white femininity. Though an intersectional approach we can better understand the compounding labor that Black women must engage in through their marginalization based on both race and gender.

“Women’s Work:” Digital Intimacy and Feminized Labor

⁶⁵ Brock, “Who Do You Think You Are?” 30-2.

⁶⁶ Williams, 288.

⁶⁷ Lawson, “Platform Vulnerabilities,” 821.

⁶⁸ Steele, 78.

⁶⁹ Neil and Mbilishaka, 174.

⁷⁰ Steele; bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1988).

The ideology of aspirational labor underscores all of the time-intensive physical and emotional labor that being a digital content creator entails such as creating content and maintaining an online brand and digital persona.⁷¹ According to Duffy, aspirational labor is “a forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative production.”⁷² Aspirational labor adopts neoliberal myths of success to motivate creators. The “success myth,” is described by Florencia García-Rapp as a “promise...tying future success to present and past effort.”⁷³ Digital content creators like bloggers, vloggers, and influencers engage in entrepreneurial femininity, which Duffy and Hund describe as the post-feminist ideal of “having it all.”⁷⁴ The allure of online work being situated in the home means that women can balance societal expectations to work full-time and raise a family.⁷⁵ These aspirational ideals obscure the “labor, discipline, and capital necessary to emulate these standards, while deploying the unshakable myth that women should work *through* and *for* consumption.”⁷⁶ Entrepreneurial femininity grants digital content creators access to entrepreneurship through using their platforms which celebrate self-expression and individualism while simultaneously incorporating consumption.⁷⁷ Lifestyle media glamorizes labor, which is viewed as an extension of the self; digital labor and self-fashioning are inextricably linked.⁷⁸ This has serious implications for

⁷¹ Duffy and Hund, 2.

⁷² Duffy, “The Romance of Work,” 446.

⁷³ Florencia García-Rapp, “‘Come Join and Let’s BOND’: Authenticity and Legitimacy Building on YouTube’s Beauty Community,” *Journal of Media Practice* 18, no. 2–3 (2017): 128.

⁷⁴ Duffy and Hund, 2.

⁷⁵ Brooke Erin Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska, “Gender and Self-Enterprise in the Social Media Age: a Digital Double Bind.” *Information Communication and Society*, Volume 20, no. 6 (2017): 843-59; Elizabeth Nathanson, “Sweet Sisterhood: Cupcakes as Sites of Feminized Consumption and Production,” in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (University of Illinois Press, 2015).

⁷⁶ Duffy and Hund, 2.

⁷⁷ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 45.

⁷⁸ Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV*, 7; Minh-Ha T. Pham, “Invisible Labor and Racial Visibilities in Outfit Posts,” in *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging* (Duke University Press, 2015), 186.

feminized laborers as the lines between work and leisure, the workplace and the home, continue to blur. Neoliberalism is structured to exploit feminized bodies through its emphasis on aesthetic and emotional labor as well as self-entrepreneurship, which requires putting in extra hours of unrecognized labor to achieve success.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the nature of vlogging incites visibility and intimacy, which are “conduits for post-feminist empowerment.”⁸⁰

To be successful in digital creative industries, one must be able to turn oneself into a commodity. While self-fashioning has historically been feminized and considered nonproductive, Minh-Ha T. Pham asserts that the labor of digital content creators is both productive and generative.⁸¹ For example, in sponsored content or videos created in partnership with brands, products are featured, but the videos themselves are also products.⁸² This content makes a creator’s lifestyle seem appealing and enviable by masking the work that goes on behind the scenes while promoting capitalist and post-feminist notions of consumption through product endorsements. Vloggers must appear both authentic and aspirational, concealing the processes of self-fashioning by making it appear ordinary and part of their everyday life.⁸³ When creating content and interacting online, vloggers must present themselves as “rightfully motivated:” creating content because they love their work and their audiences, not for financial gain.⁸⁴ This concept also offers an explanation to how digital creative work is glamourized; in order for this work to remain appealing it must always seem fun and exciting, those that engage in it must always appear to be doing what they love.

⁷⁹ Laurie Ouellette, “*America’s Next Top Model: Neoliberal Labor*,” in *How to Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), 169–72.

⁸⁰ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 122.

⁸¹ Pham, 170-71.

⁸² Berryman and Kavka, 313.

⁸³ Pham, 178.

⁸⁴ García-Rapp, 127.

For women-identified vloggers, engaging in feminized labor through beauty and lifestyle videos means obscuring the labor that goes into the production of content and the maintenance of relationships online by making it look effortless, and through the aspirational labor facilitated by the meritocracy of digital spaces, something that anyone could do with passion and hard work. The “cultural feminization of economic life” renders emotional connections into commodities as well.⁸⁵ Vloggers must engage in emotional, relational labor, engaging with their audiences. This notion is a part of a long lineage of “women’s work” being defined through affective labor, “the production and management of emotions.”⁸⁶ Berryman and Kavka explain that many vloggers use intimacy to build affective relationships with their audiences as well as engaging in celebrification, which they describe as a gendered process to promote aspirational lifestyles.⁸⁷ There is room in this argument to acknowledge the additional emotional labor that Black women are expected to perform in order to speak about their experiences with racism online and in the beauty community while also forming affective familial relationships with audiences that rely on being authentic and rightfully motivated.

The post-feminist emphasis on personal individual responsibility and constant self-maintenance and self-improvement are funneled into the necessity for workers to “become flexible to the demands of the market.”⁸⁸ Ouellette describes this as the concept of “self-enterprise” which relates to larger neoliberal economic shifts and the sociocultural blurring of public and private space.⁸⁹ Flexibility draws many to careers in digital industries with the

⁸⁵ Nancy K Baym, “Connect With Your Audience! The Relational Labor of Connection,” *Communication Review* 18, no. 1 (2015): 15.

⁸⁶ Pham, 187.

⁸⁷ Berryman and Kavka, 308.

⁸⁸ Amy Adele Hasinoff, “Fashioning Race for the Free Market on America’s Next Top Model,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 3 (July 2008): 326.

⁸⁹ Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV*.

promise of creative and personal freedom.⁹⁰ But it is not without its limitations. Digital content creators are caught between two worlds: vulnerable and visible, the glamorous/aspirational and the everyday, continuously deciding what parts of their personal lives to publicly share online and turn into profitable content. Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska apply the term “digital double bind” to social media labor that “conceal[s] and reveal[s] enduring structures of power” as it exposes how digital workplaces are celebrated for their egalitarianism yet continue to perpetuate harmful notions about gender and labor.⁹¹ As I have explored throughout this literature review, the labor of digital content creation is highly gendered, but it is also racialized. The promise of flexibility connects to notions of free labor, which Pham explains has historically been associated with whiteness.⁹² This raises two key questions about the intersections of race, gender, and labor: Who is expected to work for free? And who uses/benefits from free labor?

One concept that I plan to unpack through my analysis is the notion of authenticity. Sarah Banet-Weiser asserts that the meaning of authenticity has shifted with brand culture, becoming a brand in itself.⁹³ In online spaces, “realness” is used by vloggers to sell products and appeal to consumers through affective engagement and promotional content that appears more relational. Realness has become enmeshed in post-feminist empowerment rhetoric, adopted by brands like Dove and Nike to celebrate “real women.”⁹⁴ Yet, realness remains socioculturally constructed through hegemonic beauty standards that center white femininity. Outside of the fantasy of the fashion and beauty industries, digital spaces like vlogs are where audiences can go to see “real” people.⁹⁵ The assumed democratization of online spaces like YouTube channels and Instagram

⁹⁰ Pham, 172.

⁹¹ Duffy and Pruchniewska, 856.

⁹² Pham, 175.

⁹³ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 11.

⁹⁴ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 100.

⁹⁵ Pham, 168-69.

feeds touts the possibility of diversity, as online content creators seek to distance themselves and the fashion and beauty industry's unrealness, reoutching, and photoshopping. Authenticity is a key element in a vlogger's success. The authentic vlogger is characterized as a young white woman with a "girl next door" persona. This performance of innocence and approachability privileges white femininity. Authenticity has an additional implication for Black women as their racial identity is also policed as not appearing "Black enough" or performing their Blackness properly. Thus, Black vloggers' identities, lifestyles, and lived experiences are inseparable from their personal brand.

Being a Black vlogger leads to an increased level of visibility online. As hypervisible subjects, Black women are in a precarious position. This visibility can lead to career and financial success through increased views and engagement. However, this visibility can also lead to increased harassment and racist and sexist comments. It is important to recognize how the intersections of race and gender impact how Black women vloggers navigate online platforms that operate under the assumption of whiteness. YouTube allows Black women to see and represent themselves in new ways amidst stereotypes and flattened images of Black womanhood in other media spaces, while also making Black women more susceptible to experiencing racism and racial violence online. I am concerned with how our conceptualization of authenticity has shifted in digital spaces for Black vloggers, particularly how authenticity is performed online and what is expected of those that claim to be authentic.

This literature review has offered an exploration of topics across a variety of disciplines to draw connections between YouTube as a platform and the vulnerabilities Black women vloggers experience due to an increased level of visibility online compounded by their racial and gender identities. Additionally, this scholarship has explored how Black women navigate digital

spaces, build community, and engage in discourse that challenges hegemonic beauty standards. Through this discussion, it is clear that authenticity, digital aspirational labor, race, and gender are linked. For a vlogger, maintaining an online presence is labor in itself. In addition to creating content, vloggers are responsible for also constructing a unique online identity, developing and maintaining a personal brand.⁹⁶ Vloggers must find the delicate balance between commodifying themselves and their personal brands to continue to be profitable while maintaining an authentic and trustworthy persona. There is labor involved in creating and publishing content online, both on YouTube, and by maintaining other social media accounts like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Vloggers must also encourage audience engagement on their content through likes, subscriptions/follows, and shares. There is an added layer of feminized emotional labor that digital content creators must perform through engaging with their audiences, from liking and responding to comments or replying to DMs.⁹⁷ As I have discussed throughout this literature review, there is quite a bit of scholarship on digital content creators and labor. However, much of this scholarship centers white women. My thesis studies an additional level of labor that has not been discussed in scholarship of this kind, that which beauty vloggers of color must perform, and that involves combatting racism in the beauty industry and in society more broadly. My research seeks to fill in the gap across this scholarship by exploring the uncompensated emotional labor that Black vloggers engage in by discussing their experiences online and navigating racist platforms.

Theory and Methods

My thesis seeks to analyze uncompensated aspirational labor and how Black vloggers discuss the work that they do online. The methods for this project were adapted from Duffy and

⁹⁶ Duffy and Pruchniewska, 848.

⁹⁷ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*.

Hund's 2015 study of fashion bloggers.⁹⁸ In their analysis, Duffy and Hund identify three elements of entrepreneurial femininity: discourses of “the destiny of passionate work,” staging “the glam life,” and sharing “carefully curated” intimate details of one’s personal life on social media.⁹⁹ These elements shape how women-identified digital content creators construct their personal brands and online personas, as well as how they frame the labor they perform. Duffy and Hund assert that their sites of study allow us to understand the “production of the fashion vlogger subject *in her own voice*.”¹⁰⁰ By studying the content produced by the vlogger herself as well as direct quotes from interviews, I am able to center Aina’s experiences and in my analysis to better understand how her identity intersects with the content she creates and ultimately informs her labor. Centering Black women's identities and experiences is rooted in intersectional Black feminist theory. In my thesis, I use intersectional Black feminist and Black cyberfeminist theory. Intersectionality is a term used to describe power relations and to explain how identity affects lived experiences.¹⁰¹ Intersectionality lays the groundwork for Black feminism. An intersectional approach is imperative when studying Black women’s experiences in digital spaces because it offers a way to fully engage with Black women’s existence at multiple sites of marginalization and systems of oppression like race, gender, class, and labor.¹⁰² In the section that follows, I briefly define Black cyberfeminism and its connections to Black feminist theory to explain why this approach is best fitting for my analysis in combination with a framework adapted from Duffy and Hund’s research.

⁹⁸ Duffy and Hund, 3-4.

⁹⁹ Duffy and Hund, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Duffy and Hund, 3.

¹⁰¹ Tressie McMillan Cottom and Karen Gregory, “Black Cyberfeminism: Ways Forward to Intersectionality and Digital Sociology,” in *Digital Sociologies*, ed. Tressie McMillan Cottom and Jessie Daniels (University of Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), 217.

¹⁰² Steele, 74.

Tressie McMillan Cottom and Karen Gregory describe cyberfeminism as an articulation of feminist theory that explores, “How gendered bodies and relations shape technologies and how we interact with them.”¹⁰³ Black feminist thought centers Black women in discussions of race that have historically focused on Black men, and discussions of gender as a social and political category that continuously centers white women. This analytic is born out of Black women’s exclusion from mainstream (read: white) feminist movements that ignored intersections of race, class, and sexuality as well as Black women’s exclusion from Civil Rights movements that relied heavily on charismatic male leaders and similarly overlooked the needs of Black women. Safiya Umoja Noble builds upon Black feminist scholars like hooks, Crenshaw, and Collins and explains that Black feminist thought provides a lens to understand how race and gender are “socially constructed and mutually constituted through historical, political, and economic processes.”¹⁰⁴ Black cyberfeminism builds upon intersectional feminist and cyberfeminist theory to explore relationships between gender, race, and technology, specifically how marginalized groups use virtual technologies.¹⁰⁵ Cottom and Gregory contend that Black cyberfeminism is also concerned with power relations, thus, Black cyberfeminism is also “assertively political.”¹⁰⁶ Black cyberfeminism is an extension of these theoretical concepts that aim to identify the power relations that occur at the intersections of gender and race in digital spaces.

Applying a Black cyberfeminist approach centers the experiences of Black women as well as their labor. Cottom and Gregory state that Black cyberfeminism interrogates “how social

¹⁰³ Cottom and Gregory, 211.

¹⁰⁴ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 33.

¹⁰⁵ Kishonna L. Gray, “‘They’re Just Too Urban’: Black Gamers Streaming on Twitch,” in *Digital Sociologies*, ed. Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillan Cottom (University of Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), 359.

¹⁰⁶ Cottom and Gregory, 281.

relations of dominance are translated through digitally mediated relationships with technology, the interests that produce it, and the processes that resist them.”¹⁰⁷ Black feminist theory has been applied to Black women’s activist work to describe how Black women experience both racial and gendered oppression and engage in acts of resistance. Black cyberfeminist theory illuminates how Black women’s resistant work occurs in digital spaces. This theoretical framework decenters discussions of white techno-masculinity and the default white male user that erases Black bodies from digital space and works to fill in the gaps in scholarship on digital feminized labor that has left out Black women. Additionally, dominant discourse about online spaces is usually deterministic and portrays these spaces as neutral, ignoring how digital spaces recreate systemic and structural sites of oppression.¹⁰⁸ A Black cyberfeminist approach builds upon a legacy of scholarship created by Black women. It prioritizes Black women engaging in radical resistant work by shifting the focus to how Black women navigate digital spaces. Centering the experiences of Black vloggers like Aina through an intersectional Black cyberfeminist lens allows me to examine how race is continuously ignored in scholarship on gendered labor in the digital creative industries.

A successful vlogger maintains a level of transparency with their audience, from sharing intimate details of their lives as well as embodying an authentic persona, characterized by being true to oneself. I selected Aina for this project because she is one of the most notable dark-skinned Black beauty vloggers that has amassed a large audience on her YouTube channel and other social media profiles. She has also been recognized for her anti-racist efforts and her commitment to inclusivity on her channel. She has been featured in many popular press articles

¹⁰⁷ Cottom and Gregory, 217.

¹⁰⁸ Safiya Umoja Noble, “A Future for Intersectional Black Feminist Technology Studies,” *Scholar & Feminist Online* 13, no. 3 (2016): 1-3.

and celebrated her ability to build community online. She is open and honest on her channel and is widely known for her authentic and trustworthy persona, which has also been attributed to her success. While similar figures exist on other platforms, the images published on blogs and social media feeds are static, often polished and highly edited. I have chosen to explore YouTube because it is a platform that allows for direct address, simulates liveness, and affords creators vulnerability which facilitates deeper levels of interaction and connection with audiences. As I explore in the chapters that follow, this resembles familial bonds or relationships.

This project is a textual analysis that looks at a few key sources: videos posted to Aina’s YouTube channel, information collected from her personal website and social media, and interviews from popular press articles in which she describes her motivations for starting her YouTube channel and discusses the work she does and the impact of her content. For my analysis of Aina’s YouTube channel, I watched her beauty and lifestyle content as well as vlogs. Aina’s “content” videos focus specifically on beauty and lifestyle content through product hauls, reviews, and tutorials.¹⁰⁹ They are highly edited and appear more professional, making them more profitable. Aina’s vlogs facilitate intimacy with her audience by offering them an up-close look at her everyday life.¹¹⁰ I analyzed videos that were posted within the last three years (from 2018 to 2021) starting with Aina’s 2018 video titled “Black Girls React to Tarte Shape Tape Foundation.”¹¹¹ The video is a response to the 2018 scandal with Tarte Cosmetics and their highly anticipated Shape Tape foundation, which at the time of its release only had three deep shades. The video went viral and is still the most viewed video on her channel with over 5.3 million views. This time frame encompasses when Aina started to receive the most public

¹⁰⁹ Berryman and Kavka, 310-312.

¹¹⁰ Berryman and Kavka, 310-312.

¹¹¹ Jackie Aina, “Black Girls React to Tarte Shape Tape Foundation | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, January 17, 2018, video, 25:28, <https://youtu.be/4cXsgT3ZcL8>.

attention for her videos and also created content that openly discussed racism in the YouTube beauty community as well as offline.

Aina’s videos are personal; from reviewing whether products are “chocolate girl friendly” and critiquing racism in the beauty community to discussing colorism and dating preferences or why you shouldn’t touch a Black woman’s hair. The content produced by Aina enables her audience to form a relationship with her by gaining access to her daily life and also creates space to engage in discussion about important social and political issues. Through an analysis of Aina’s videos in addition to information collected from additional sources described above, this thesis illustrates how she engages in multiple levels of compensated and uncompensated labor online.¹¹² Aina takes lifestyle and beauty content a step further by folding her racial identity and experience as a Black woman into her videos, which is one of the most successful components of her personal brand.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter Two shows how Aina has crafted a personal brand identity that skillfully balances her aspirational, glamorous lifestyle and celebrity status with her down-to-earth, trustworthy and authentic persona. I apply Duffy and Hund’s study of vloggers and entrepreneurial femininity in which they identify three interrelated tropes employed to communicate “having it all:” “the destiny of passionate work, staging the glam life, and carefully curated social sharing.”¹¹³ Through this framework, I explore how Aina uses rhetorics of passion to obscure the labor of engaging in brand partnerships, designing branded products, and running her own businesses, all while continuing to appear rightfully motivated. This chapter focuses on authenticity and the branded self, which are inextricably linked in spaces of digital feminized

¹¹² Duffy and Hund, 4.

¹¹³ Duffy and Hund, 1.

entrepreneurship and further complicated by race. I discuss how Aina facilitates an intimate relationship with her audience who applauds her for always “keeping it real.” This analysis illustrates how Aina forms intimate relationships with her audience through content and engagement, achieved through performing feminized relational labor. I continue my exploration of how Aina builds affective relationships by positioning herself as a family member, assuming the role of “Auntie” with her audience that refers to themselves as the “Jackie Aina Family.” I also look at user comments on her videos to illustrate how Aina has used her status to build a community that behaves like both a family and a fandom. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Aina’s vlogs to illustrate how she facilitates intimacy and maintains her down-to-earth persona. Intentionally capturing and sharing some of her most personal and vulnerable moments through vlogs allows Aina to connect with her audience, assuring viewers that she is just like them, and further strengthening affective bonds.

Chapter Three looks at Aina’s labor from another perspective. Online platforms afford Black women invaluable spaces to discuss Black identity and build community. This chapter explores YouTube as a place of community building for Black women, facilitated through channels like Aina’s. As one of the few prominent dark-skinned Black women lifestyle and beauty vloggers, Aina is placed in a precarious state of hypervisibility. This enables her to reach wider audiences, but also leaves her more vulnerable to online harassment, which is compounded by her racial and gender identities. This chapter unpacks the uncompensated labor that Aina engages in as a Black woman navigating hostile digital spaces. I discuss YouTube as a platform, addressing algorithmic bias and online harassment and how they connect to race and gender as well as Aina's experiences as a Black woman online. I also address how Aina describes her experiences online, from receiving racist comments to the physical and emotional labor she

engages in to monitor and protect her space. The last section of the chapter is an analysis of how Aina incorporates her personal experiences and identity into her videos, many of which have a focus on social justice. I also discuss how Aina challenges hegemonic beauty norms through her content and engages in open and honest discussions about socially relevant topics like skin bleaching and post-racism. Aina's outspoken personality has labeled her a champion for racial equity and inclusion, especially in the beauty community, which I argue is another element of her personal brand and a key reason for her continued success.

Chapter Four concludes my thesis with a summary of my research, reasserting the importance of examining race in discussions of digital feminized labor and how digital spaces can be viewed as sites of resistant work. I discuss the limitations of my research and its contributions to the fields of digital studies, new media studies, and feminist media studies. This project has enabled me to further conversations about affective communities and digital feminized labor by also addressing racial identity. I connect Black vloggers' labor to larger discussions about the role of Black women in digital activism, particularly how Aina's work as a vocal and hypervisible Black woman online has converged with contemporary social movements like Black Lives Matter. This project is a culmination of my interests in identity, online spaces, and digital feminized careers like vlogging. I am interested in how the internet functions as a space that is "both/and." The internet is a place where crafting an authentic persona is imperative to facilitate a strong community but also a means of staying financially viable. It is also a place where hypervisibility is vital to a Black vloggers' success but can render her more vulnerable to harassment. My project centers Black women's experiences and explores the complexities and ambivalence of consumption, labor, authenticity, and the possibility of digital spaces to carve out community and create social change.

CHAPTER 2: “JUST A REGULAR GIRL:”

COMMODYING THE SELF, MAINTAINING AUTHENTICITY, AND “HAVING IT ALL”

Introduction

This chapter applies Brook Erin Duffy’s concept of aspirational labor as a framework for studying the Black beauty vlogger and follows Duffy and Emily Hund’s study of fashion bloggers in which they explore how women-identified digital content creators communicate their labor and success online. Duffy and Hund identify three interrelated tropes employed by these creators to display entrepreneurial femininity and show that they “have it all:” “the destiny of passionate work, staging the glam life, and carefully curated social sharing.”¹¹⁴ These are three ways that Black beauty vlogger Jackie Aina maintains her affective relationships with her audience and further shows her authenticity and rightful motivations. By integrating these tropes into personal branding techniques, Aina carefully balances her identity as a content creator with that of a celebrity but also an “Auntie” figure. Auntie is a term of endearment for Black women who take on mentorship roles and are viewed as a “symbol of strength” and the “backbone” of the Black family.¹¹⁵ Aunties are not always blood-related, but they are given this title to show respect and admiration.

Aina’s personal brand is a balance of a glam aesthetic and a humble, honest persona. In addition, by using her platform to celebrate Black women and speak out against social injustice,

¹¹⁴ Duffy and Hund, 1.

¹¹⁵ Dahleen Glanton, “Column: Is ‘Auntie’ a Term of Endearment for African American Women or Does It Promote an ‘Aunt Jemima’ Stereotype?,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/dahleen-glanton/ct-dahleen-glanton-auntie-maxine-waters-20190620-w3j7p7lwh5bizcacmw3lpwl7ra-story.html>.

Aina is revered by her audience as being trustworthy and authentic and is known for always “keeping it real.” In the sections that follow, I illustrate how Aina incorporates elements of her personal ethos into her personal brand, as well as continuing to build affective relationships with her audience. In her interviews with fashion bloggers, Duffy identifies authenticity, self-expression, and realness as three common themes.¹¹⁶ This chapter explores how these themes emerge when artfully folded into discourse around success and “having it all” online. This chapter illuminates how Aina has continued to place her personal branded identity at the forefront of her content and other projects to maintain such a large yet intimate and supportive audience while also gaining financial success and celebrity status.

A Leap of Faith: The Destiny of Passionate Work

The notion of passion appears frequently in discourse around digital content creators. Duffy and Hund explain that a vlogger’s success lies within their ability to illustrate how they turned their passions into a career.¹¹⁷ Yet, the labor involved in achieving this success must remain invisible. The ideology of “doing what you love” masks labor behind a rhetoric of passion. Duffy and Hund explain, “By downplaying calculated entrepreneurial aspirations, these [vloggers/]bloggers reaffirm the post-feminist ideal of individual success obtained through inner self-discovery.”¹¹⁸ When describing their experiences, content creators often minimize their entry into these industries as intentional, instead viewing their success as “destiny,” or their “calling.” The mysticism that renders labor invisible as a means to success connects notions of post-feminism and neoliberalism to affect and feminized labor: the reason you are unsuccessful is not because you did not work hard enough, but because you are not passionate enough. Duffy

¹¹⁶ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 99.

¹¹⁷ Duffy and Hund, 3.

¹¹⁸ Duffy and Hund, 4.

explains that digital spaces are conduits for post-feminist “empowerment” through their highly visual nature that allows for “visibility and intimate sharing,” through centering the self.¹¹⁹

Digital creative industries entice marginalized groups through the promise of instant success and the ability to “have it all” by presenting the internet as a meritocracy or egalitarian space.

Furthermore, rhetorics of passion and empowerment mask the labor and risks of digital content creation because vloggers like Aina are always presented as doing what they love. To maintain the fantasy of passion as a means to success, vloggers must always make sure that their work does not actually look like work. Duffy explains that digital labor blurs the lines between labor and leisure as well as creativity and commerce, as seen in the usage of the term “creative industries” to describe bloggers, vloggers, influencers, and other digital content creators.¹²⁰

Discourses of passion support a vlogger’s authentic persona and justifies their rightful motivations, while simultaneously minimizing the labor that being a vlogger entails. Florencia García-Rapp states that two key components of authenticity for vloggers are trustworthiness and being “rightfully motivated,” creating content to help and inspire people, not just doing it for the money.¹²¹ Aina has incorporated this ideology into her personal brand and continuously presents herself as rightfully motivated. For Aina, beauty was her “first love;” makeup was a creative outlet that facilitated self-expression and offered an escape from her everyday life.¹²² Aina explains that it was never her goal to be an influencer.¹²³ She started her channel searching for community: “I was in the military, far away from friends and family, and really lonely. The one

¹¹⁹ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 122.

¹²⁰ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 61.

¹²¹ García-Rapp, 130–31.

¹²² Alexa Tietjen, “INFLUENCE PEDDLER: Jackie Aina on Expanding Too Faced’s Foundation Shade Range,” *WWD*, June 26, 2018, <https://wwd.com/beauty-industry-news/beauty-features/jackie-aina-youtube-too-faced-born-this-way-foundation-1202735299/>; Carlos.

¹²³ Aina and Schallon, Carlos.

thing that always made me feel better was makeup.”¹²⁴ Aina never intended to create a YouTube channel but was encouraged by a friend to post her makeup looks online.¹²⁵ She said that she felt “left out” of the beauty community as a dark-skinned Black woman and created her channel to make beauty “accessible to everyone.”¹²⁶ This narrative that her channel just *happened* gives the impression that her success was achieved overnight. This also dismisses the copious amounts of unpaid labor that Aina engages in, such as filming and editing videos, negotiating deals with brands, managing her social media accounts, and interacting and engaging with audiences across her platforms. Again, hard work is obscured by the ability for Aina to pursue her creative passions and build a brand around doing what she loves. Aina’s desire to build a community on her channel that celebrates diversity works to assert her rightful motivations, which are attributed to her authentic persona. Aina’s position as a notable influencer has granted her opportunities that are typically afforded to celebrities, but she attempts to maintain her authentic persona by delicately balancing between her celebrity status and her identity as a “regular girl” that happens to be famous.¹²⁷

In addition to authenticity, successful beauty vloggers must also create a sense of intimacy with their subscribers. Aina has stated that she wants her channel to be “a place that people come to feel like they’re at home.”¹²⁸ Instead of presenting herself as motivated by money or fame, Aina explains that her channel is about “people feeling beautiful.”¹²⁹ She claims that her

¹²⁴ Aina and Schallon; Carlos.

¹²⁵ Carlos.

¹²⁶ Jackie Aina, “Unpopular Opinions: Beauty Guru Edition | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, January 25, 2019, video, 26:52, <https://youtu.be/nQX02UNn2ko>.

¹²⁷ Berryman and Kavka, 315; Aina and Schallon.

¹²⁸ Alexa Tietjen, “WWD Beauty Inc Awards: Jackie Aina Wins Influencer of the Year,” *WWD*, December 13, 2018, <https://wwd.com/beauty-industry-news/beauty-features/wwd-beauty-inc-awards-jackie-aina-influencer-of-the-year-1202925909/>.

¹²⁹ Aina and Schallon.

goal has always been to support and celebrate Black people, especially Black women. Aina’s humility and down-to-earth approachability are what make her relatable and ultimately profitable.¹³⁰ She states that viewers continue to watch her videos for the content, but more for her personality. She states, “People loved that I wasn’t this out-of-reach makeup artist—just a regular girl...being myself paid off.”¹³¹ Through situating herself against the highly edited fashion and beauty industries, Aina still must work to establish herself as “real.” Duffy explains that realness is “coded as *relatability to an imagined audience*.”¹³² As that audience has grown, so has the work to remain relatable.

When Aina started her channel in 2009, beauty-related content on YouTube had 3 billion annual views.¹³³ In 2016, there were over 5.3 million beauty videos on YouTube.¹³⁴ By the end of 2018, beauty-related content had over 169 billion annual views.¹³⁵ This rapid industry growth means that vloggers must work twice as hard to stay relevant and capture audiences. The success of an individual channel is attributed to content but is much more dependent on the vlogger’s personality. In an interview with *WWD*, after being recognized as the 2018 Influencer of the Year, Aina commented on the oversaturation of beauty content online. She contended that users, “Don’t need another eyebrow tutorial,” but that they want to see something different, something real.¹³⁶ Aina has stated that viewers come to her channel for her flair and personality.

Authenticity achieved through realness and relatability is another key way that vloggers can stand out among the crowd. For Aina, authenticity has been central to her personal brand from

¹³⁰ Duffy, “The Romance of Work,” 447.

¹³¹ Aina and Schallon.

¹³² Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 111.

¹³³ Aina and Schallon; H. Tankovska, “YouTube: Annual Beauty Content Views 2009-2018 (in Billions),” January 26, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/294655/youtube-monthly-beauty-content-views/>.

¹³⁴ H. Tankovska, “YouTube: Annual Beauty Content Views 2009-2018.” Ibid.

¹³⁵ H. Tankovska, “YouTube: Annual Beauty Content Views 2009-2018.” Ibid.

¹³⁶ Tietjen, “Jackie Aina Wins Influencer of the Year.”

the beginning, which is arguably why her channel continues to be successful and explains how she has cultivated a loyal audience amidst her growing fame. Aina's authentic persona is one of the key reasons she has amassed such a large following, but her authenticity is also artfully melded into her personal brand identity which is used to appeal to her audience as consumers and sell products created by Aina through brand partnerships and her own business ventures.

Branded and Bougie: Brand Partnerships and Staging “The Glam Life”

According to Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, “The most successful YouTubers are combining commodification and celebrification, using the one to fan the flames of the other.”¹³⁷ Aina is known for her unapologetically glamorous lifestyle, which includes a closet filled with designer shoes and handbags, a 20-step skincare routine, and an expensively decorated home (highlighted on her TikTok with the hashtag #lavishlyjackie). Because we get such an up-close look at Aina's lifestyle, her interest in fashion and beauty and her glam aesthetic seem to be a natural part of her identity. Interests in fashion and beauty are gendered, and Aina's presence in the beauty community challenges larger ideas around Black women's interest and participation in the beauty industry.¹³⁸ Aina's promotion of her lavish lifestyle as a part of her personal brand is a form of celebrification, which Berryman and Kavka define as the gendered triangulation of self-promotion, intimacy, and authenticity.¹³⁹

Trustworthiness is the foundation for affective communities and is one of the reasons Aina's channel is so successful. As I will discuss in this section, Aina's honesty has led to groundbreaking partnerships. While honestly reviewing products can have a negative financial

¹³⁷ Berryman and Kavka, 309.

¹³⁸ Berryman and Kavka, 309.

¹³⁹ Berryman and Kavka, 309.

impact on a vlogger by harming their relationships with brands and limiting their opportunities for future partnerships, Aina’s honesty is a facet of her authentic persona. Her audience trusts that she will always honestly review products, good and bad, even if they are from brands she has partnered with in the past. Her audience identifies her trustworthiness as a reason they continue to support her channel. Many of Aina’s videos follow the popular “Get Ready With Me” (GRWM) format in which a vlogger puts on makeup while directly addressing the audience, sharing life updates or discussing specific topics. A comment on one of Aina’s GRWM videos with over 1.8k likes, including from Aina herself, calls Aina the epitome of honesty because “She gets a sponsorship and still 🙌 [clapping hands with medium skin tone] doesn’t 🙌 kiss 🙌 the 🙌 brands 🙌 ass 🙌 and 🙌 keeps 🙌 it 🙌 honest.”¹⁴⁰

Another way Aina maintains her authenticity is by appealing to a middle-class sensibility.¹⁴¹ Videos where Aina reviews more affordable products provide a balance to her videos featuring high-end beauty and skincare products and ensure that she is financially accessible to her audience.¹⁴² In a GRWM video sponsored by affordable makeup brand NYX Cosmetics, Aina admits that some of the products were not her favorites.¹⁴³ But she continues to use the products, turning the unfavorable review into an opportunity to show viewers how to make more affordable products work “for the girls on the budget... not trying to spend forty dwollahs on a foundation.” Aina thanks NYX Cosmetics in the video, for “keeping the lights on and keeping the bills paid,” referring to the bright studio lights in front of her as expensive.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Will Coleman, 2018, comment on Aina’s “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!” YouTube video.

¹⁴¹ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 134.

¹⁴² Jackie Aina, “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, September 24, 2018, video, 20:28, <https://youtu.be/Mi7rZleN8L8>.

¹⁴³ Aina, “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!”

¹⁴⁴ Aina, “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!”

Although Aina can clearly afford the production tools to create high-quality videos, by acknowledging that she still needs sponsorships to pay her bills she is engaging in reflexive work to appear more accessible. While Aina declares herself “bougie,” alluding to her excessive style and expensive taste, she continues to maintain her authenticity by relying heavily on her personality and humor, using her notoriety for honest reviews as a means to share with her audience which products are worth spending money on. Aina’s lavish lifestyle then becomes a conduit for her authentic persona – she tries the products and gives honest reviews to prevent the everyday consumer from wasting their money. Aina frequently attributes her success to her honesty and authenticity. Yet, as Aina continues to become more successful, she must toe the line between being accessible to her audience and continuing to promote her glamorous life.

The “glam life” is portrayed through visual aesthetics and markers of a high-class status. These markers are highly commodifiable and are easily shareable on digital platforms.¹⁴⁵ Luxurious living is one key element of Aina’s branded persona and the products she creates. Aina’s promotion of the glam life is best seen through her brand partnerships, in which she gracefully straddles being both a content creator and a celebrity. Berryman and Kavka explain that along with the rise of social media influencer culture, vloggers have become a key part of the beauty industry as brands recognize the lucrative potential of working with digital content creators.¹⁴⁶ As sponsored content online continues to increase, YouTube videos and Instagram posts are beginning to more closely resemble commercials. Aina has been described as “refreshingly real” amidst highly edited images and (often undisclosed) sponsored content in the

¹⁴⁵ Duffy and Hund, 7.

¹⁴⁶ Berryman and Kavka, 308.

YouTube beauty community.¹⁴⁷ Aina openly discloses sponsored content and continues to present herself as rightfully motivated, turning down sponsorships that do not align with her morals or personal brand, even making videos about sponsorships she would never do.¹⁴⁸ By openly sharing her reasons for working with particular brands and refusing to work with others, Aina illustrates the careful consideration that goes into a brand partnership, justifying the partnerships she does have, and further solidifying her authenticity. Aina has worked with affordable and high-end makeup and skincare brands like Dermalogica, Fenty Beauty, E.l.f., Artist Couture, and Pat McGrath Labs as well as companies like Google to create sponsored content on her channel.¹⁴⁹ Aina has also collaborated with cosmetic brands Too Faced Cosmetics and Anastasia Beverly Hills to create her own products.

In 2018, Aina worked with Too Faced Cosmetics to develop nine new shades of their best-selling Born This Way foundation, expanding the range and offering more options for darker complexions.¹⁵⁰ The partnership started after Too Faced Co-Founder and Chief Creative Officer Jerrod Blandino saw Aina’s review of another Too Faced foundation in which she openly critiqued the limited shade range.¹⁵¹ Aina’s partnership with Too Faced is significant for a few reasons. First, it challenges preconceived notions that cosmetics targeted to darker complexions are not profitable. The shade Aina regularly wears on her channel and the darkest shade in the line both sold out immediately after their release.¹⁵² Second, it illustrates the power of Aina’s

¹⁴⁷ Khalea Underwood, “Jackie Aina Won’t Hide The Beauty Industry’s Ugly Side — Even If It Costs Her,” *Refinery29*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/07/203259/jackie-aina-too-faced-foundation-launch-interview>.

¹⁴⁸ Jackie Aina, “SPONSORSHIPS I’d NEVER DO!! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, June 28, 2019, video, 25:56, https://youtu.be/zCO_S07UTSY.

¹⁴⁹ Carlos; Tietjen, “Jackie Aina Wins Influencer of the Year.”

¹⁵⁰ Aina and Schallon.

¹⁵¹ Underwood.

¹⁵² Tietjen, “Jackie Aina Wins Influencer of the Year;” Underwood.

audience; because Aina’s name is attached to the expanded shade range, her audience trusts that the product is going to be high-quality and created with thought and care. Aina discussed her role in the partnership, explaining that she engaged in extensive research and conducted interviews with consumers to better understand their needs.¹⁵³ She explained that she wanted the launch to feel genuine and that creating the darkest shade took multiple tries to perfect.¹⁵⁴ While it was clear that a lot of work went into this collaboration, Aina’s passion and commitment to inclusion minimize that labor. Aina’s audience was eager to support her, comparing the partnership to other influencers whose brand collaborations are often just cash-grabs.¹⁵⁵ Aina was also featured in the marketing campaign for the launch of the new shades. Including Aina in the process both behind the scenes and as the face of the campaign shows her power to influence change in the beauty industry and further situates her as a celebrity. At the foundation’s launch party, Aina was interviewed by *Refinery 29*. The article provides a vivid description of Aina’s outfit and markers of luxury, like her Gucci fanny pack, were noted.¹⁵⁶ From starring in an ad campaign to attending parties dressed in high fashion, Aina continues to promote the glam life by blurring the line between vlogger/influencer and celebrity.

Branded partnerships are also a vehicle for Aina to center Black women as consumers in the beauty industry while celebrating Black women, both cornerstones of her personal brand. In 2019, Aina collaborated with Anastasia Beverly Hills (ABH) to release a highly anticipated eyeshadow palette. ABH is well-known in the beauty community for their cult eyebrow products (ABH founder Anastasia Soare is revered as the “Queen of Brows”) and for their eyeshadow palette collaborations with popular influencers. Aina is one of the first Black influencers the

¹⁵³ Aina and Schallon; Tietjen, “Jackie Aina Wins Influencer of the Year.”

¹⁵⁴ Aina and Schallon; Tietjen, “Jackie Aina Wins Influencer of the Year.”; Underwood.

¹⁵⁵ Kpop0223, 2018, comment on Aina’s “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!” YouTube video.

¹⁵⁶ Underwood.

brand has worked with. The eyeshadow shades were created by Aina to intentionally suit darker skin tones. The palette features deep jewel tones with names like “Edges,” “Lituation,” and “Dwollahs,” references to Black culture and all words that Aina regularly uses. Aina stated that she wanted the collaboration to represent her personality and the palette’s entire aesthetic represents Aina’s glam lifestyle: with a holographic iridescent faux-snakeskin exterior and Aina’s signature embossed on the front, her name is literally written all over the product.¹⁵⁷ Aina explains that she had complete creative control of the product’s design and marketing.¹⁵⁸ Again, Aina points to creativity to underscore the labor of overseeing the creation of a product from start to finish. Aina’s discussions about the process of collaborating with notable brands further illustrate her rightful motivations. Although Aina’s partnerships are profitable, she continues to emphasize the artistic process and her personal values, explaining that the products she makes are a way for her to express herself creatively and design products specifically for Black women, rather than for financial gain.

Every aspect of the branding for the ABH palette was a reflection of Aina’s personal brand and ethos. Aina starred in the campaign for the palette launch, in what Asia Ware for *Teen Vogue* called “an homage to iconic Black women,” recreating famous looks from rappers like Lil Kim and Foxy Brown.¹⁵⁹ In one photo, Aina is posed in front of a lime green sports car wearing a matching short lime green wig and a pleather catsuit with huge earrings shaped like her signature. In another, she is wearing a hairstyle inspired by Foxy Brown with a puffy cheetah-print coat and matching bodysuit adorned with necklaces and rings. In these images, Aina

¹⁵⁷ Jennifer Ford, “Exclusive: Jackie Aina Launches New Eye Shadow Palette With Anastasia Beverly Hills,” *Essence*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.essence.com/beauty/exclusive-jackie-aina-launches-new-eyeshadow-palette-with-anastasia-beverly-hills/>.

¹⁵⁸ Asia Milia Ware, “Jackie Aina Paid Homage to Iconic Black Women in Her Anastasia Beverly Hills Campaign,” *Teen Vogue*, August 15, 2019, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/jackie-aina-anastasia-beverly-hills-campaign>.

¹⁵⁹ Ware.

combines symbols of luxury like the sportscar, diamonds, and luxe clothing with elements of fashion associated with Black culture and stigmatized as “ghetto” or low class: large earrings, long nails, colorful wigs and makeup, and bright patterned clothing. The imagery Aina created through the marketing for the ABH palette launch subverted stereotypes of Blackness as excessive while simultaneously solidifying glamour as part of Aina’s personal brand. Through recreating images of famous Black women rappers, known for their sexually explicit lyrics and bold fashion choices, the campaign is also a public reclamation of Black womanhood and sexuality. Aina’s images are her way of “clapping back” against the constant policing of her Blackness and her body against the social upholding of beauty industry standards that privilege white femininity.

Aina’s palette launch also subverted representations of Black women in the beauty industry, an intentional move that was met with some controversy. One of the shade names from the palette, “Wiggalese,” put Aina in the middle of a short-lived scandal online. Aina explained that the name refers to her love for wigs but some of her white followers claimed the term closely resembled the word “wigger,” a derogatory term for white people who appropriate Black culture, and accused her of racism.¹⁶⁰ Tembe Denton-Hurst for *Nylon* explains that the white consumers’ outrage is exactly the point: “White people don't feel fully represented in Aina's narrative, and need an excuse to revoke support from the palette without feeling or appearing to be racist.”¹⁶¹ Those boycotting the palette are claiming reverse racism instead of sitting with the

¹⁶⁰ Claudia Soare, also known online as Norvina, is Anastasia Soare’s daughter and president of Anastasia Beverly Hills Cosmetics. She explained in a Tweet that the shade name was referring to wigs; Claudia Soare (@norvina), 2019, “Omg no are they really. Absolutely not. I would never allow that. It’s about wigs. Also why would Jackie name one of her own shades nvm,” Twitter, August 5, 2019, 3:55 PM, <https://twitter.com/norvina/status/1158481599249317889>.

¹⁶¹ Tembe Denton-Hurst, “The Beauty Industry Desperately Needed Jackie Aina’s Palette,” *Nylon*, n.d., <https://www.nylon.com/jackie-aina-palette-drama>.

slight discomfort of writing themselves into a narrative or recognizing that a specific product might not have been created with their needs in mind, despite almost always being the default or assumed consumer.

Historically, Black women have been considered an afterthought in the cosmetics industry, expected to “make do” with limited options. They have been unable to see themselves represented in cosmetic marketing and in the products themselves. Aina explains that many darker-skinned consumers are unable to use all of the shades in a palette and asserts that she wanted to create a palette that was “NOT ashy,” in which all of the shades would flatter even the deepest skin tones.¹⁶² Through prioritizing Black consumers, Aina’s intentional choices caused some “white tears” but further established Aina as an unapologetic champion for inclusion.¹⁶³ By using her palette and its marketing to celebrate Black women, Aina continues to strengthen her alignment between her personal ethos and her personal brand. Aina’s glamorous lifestyle becomes a commodity; her video content offers audiences a behind-the-scenes look at her life as well as opportunities to achieve a similar lifestyle by purchasing her branded products. This aspirational aesthetic is furthered through Aina’s new lifestyle brand, Forvr Mood.

Aina’s ultimate goal is to “*be* a lifestyle brand” (emphasis added).¹⁶⁴ In 2020 Aina launched her own lifestyle brand, Forvr Mood. The brand started with four candles, each scent corresponding with a “mood,” defined as “vibes personal to [Jackie Aina].”¹⁶⁵ The website allows visitors to shop by specific collections of scents, or by mood. Since the brand’s launch,

¹⁶² Nerisha Penrose, “Jackie Aina Is Launching An Eyeshadow Palette For Deeper Skin Tones,” *Elle*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.elle.com/beauty/makeup-skin-care/a28612256/jackie-aina-anastasia-beverly-hills-dark-skin/>.

¹⁶³ Leah Donnell, “When The ‘White Tears’ Just Keep Coming,” *NPR*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/11/28/649537891/when-the-white-tears-just-keep-coming>.

¹⁶⁴ Tietjen, “Jackie Aina Wins Influencer of the Year.”

¹⁶⁵ Forvr Mood. “Shop Collections.” Forvr Mood, 2021. <https://forvr mood.com/collections/all>.

Forvr Mood now sells accessories for natural hair like silk headbands and pillowcases. In an article for *The Root*, Maiysha Kai describes Forvr Mood as an opportunity for consumers to feel the same welcoming atmosphere in their own homes that Aina creates in her videos: “Aina has been inviting us into her home studio for years—now, she’s going to help us create some atmosphere in our own homes.”¹⁶⁶ Aina’s brand is another opportunity for her audience to get closer to her by purchasing her products and also relies heavily on feminized affect and emotion through focusing on “vibes” and moods. Aina’s use of intimacy and authenticity allow her to maintain her audience and engage with her audience as consumers. Through the affective community Aina has built online, she has also created a group of consumers who are eager to support her by purchasing anything she creates.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, Aina’s celebrity status and large social media following also promote Aina’s personal brand and products through the buzz her audience creates on social media.¹⁶⁸

When buying a Forvr Mood candle, consumers are buying a piece of “the glam life,” an aspirational piece of Aina’s aesthetic and lifestyle. Luxury is a core theme of Aina’s personal brand and this directly translates to Forvr Mood. With scent names adopted from Black culture like “Cuffing Season” and “Caked Up,” it is clear that this product was lovingly and savvily created “for the homies” and with the Black consumer in mind.¹⁶⁹ As discussed above, there is a clear gap in the market for mainstream high-end beauty and lifestyle products for Black women

¹⁶⁶ Maiysha Kai, “Beauty Guru Jackie Aina Is Dropping Her 1st Product Line—and It’s for the Homies,” *The Root*, July 23, 2020, <https://theglowup.theroot.com/beauty-guru-jackie-aina-is-dropping-her-1st-product-lin-1844471836>.

¹⁶⁷ This can be seen in comedic Tweets by Aina’s audience in response to her product launches, often referring to a willingness to buy makeup even though they have no idea how to use it or have no interest in makeup at all. It seems that Aina’s audience isare eagerly willing to buy anything she creates, before even seeing the products or knowing what they are; Sukimama, (@SukiGeez), 2019, “Me buying Jackie Aina’s palette knowing I don’t even wear eyeshadow,” Twitter, August 4, 2019, <https://twitter.com/SukiGeez/status/1158148892740988928>.

¹⁶⁸ Berryman and Kavka, 318.

¹⁶⁹ Kai.

consumers. The Forvr Mood website describes the brand as “a love letter from Black women to Black women” and seeks to change the narrative around the “strong Black woman trope” through encouraging self-care and unapologetic indulgence.¹⁷⁰ Forvr Mood’s marketing directly addresses Black women, offering them self-care and luxury: “We want to spoil you.”¹⁷¹ Although self-care is a movement started by Black feminists and activists that has been co-opted and conflated with consumerism to sell products, Aina aims to return self-care practices to their origins by focusing on the needs of Black women. While Aina’s entrepreneurial endeavors are motivated by profit, her authentic and trustworthy persona stays at the forefront of her personal branded identity and of her entrepreneurial projects like Forvr Mood, implying that while she profits from Forvr Mood sales, she continues to make products because she loves her audience and is passionate about her work.

In promotional material for Forvr Mood, Aina offers an intimate look at her relationship with her fiancé, Denis Asamoah, further strengthening her bonds with her audience. By including Asamoah in her business, audiences feel connected to their relationship and feel that they know the couple on a more personal level. Asamoah shared the promo video for Forvr Mood on his personal Instagram account and wrote in the caption, “Jackie will only put out products that she personally loves and uses.”¹⁷² Asamoah uses affect and points to Aina’s rightful motivations as justification for why consumers will want to buy the products. Because trustworthiness is part of Aina’s brand, Asamoah asserts that Aina has put her heart and soul into creating these products and that her audience/consumers will love them as much as she does. Because Asamoah and

¹⁷⁰ Forvr Mood. “Our Story.” Forvr Mood, 2021. <https://forvr mood.com/pages/our-story>.

¹⁷¹ Forvr Mood. “Our Story.” Forvr Mood, 2021. <https://forvr mood.com/pages/our-story>.

¹⁷² Denis Asamoah, (@denisasamoah), 2020, “Pleased to finally share what me & @jackieaina have been working on,” Instagram post, July 20, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CC3-1nsJHc7/>.

Aina have such a strong relationship, signified by Asamoah's involvement with Forvr Mood, and as I will later discuss, in her content, his unwavering support can also attest to her character.

Aina also offered her audience a behind-the-scenes look at production for Forvr Mood, further illustrating how seamlessly her branded personal identity has translated into consumable goods. Aina posted a Q&A with Asamoah on the Forvr Mood blog, inviting her audience into the warehouse and offering an up-close look at how the candles are made. The blog is appropriately named "Self-Care Sunday," demonstrating how Aina's personal ethos and luxury aesthetics are woven into all of the content she produces, including free content for her audience to consume. The blog post also features pictures of Aina and Asamoah together, smiling and hugging each other in the warehouse. In the post, Aina expresses appreciation for her audience and their positive reaction to Forvr Mood, noting that they produced 150,000 candles in only 45 days, and that the increase for demand meant they had to move to a larger space.¹⁷³ Much like the discussions surrounding her brand partnerships, the labor of running Forvr Mood is rendered invisible. Like Asamoah's Instagram post, the blog post intentionally creates a narrative that presents Forvr Mood as Aina's passion project and creative outlet, masking her labor. Through this rhetoric, Forvr Mood candles are made with love and care, instead of time, money, and physical labor. Forvr Mood is promoted as a Black woman-owned business that seeks to prioritize the needs of Black women, which affirms that Aina is motivated by passion, not profit. The blog post strategically illuminates how closely connected Aina's personal ethos and brand identity are to any product she makes, maintaining her authentic and trustworthy persona. By

¹⁷³ Sequoia Holmes, "2020 Lessons Learned + Q&A with Jackie & Denis," *Forvr Mood Self-Care Sunday* (blog), January 1, 2021, <https://forvr mood.com/blogs/self-care-sunday/2020-lessons-learned-q-a-with-jackie-denis>.

welcoming her readers into the factory for a behind-the-scenes look at manufacturing Aina establishes her rightful motivations to her audience, and ultimately potential customers.

**“We want to see you join the Jackie Aina Family permanently:” Authenticity and Affective
Community Building**

On her channel, Aina fosters affective relationships and bonds resembling kinship, while simultaneously celebrating Black identity. Community and kinship are socially constructed and center on the continuous negotiation of identities.¹⁷⁴ According to Apryl Williams, kinship, which garnered its significant meaning historically through the slave trade and African diaspora, leads to a “collective sociohistorical consciousness” and broader ideas about the meaning of familial relationships.¹⁷⁵ These familial connotations are evident in online spaces like Aina’s. Her audience refers to themselves as members of the “Jackie Aina Family,” a large affective online community that anyone can join by simply subscribing to Aina’s channel. Aina has put herself at the head of the family and refers to herself as “Auntie Jackie,” someone who loves giving advice. Aunties are a revered figure in the Black community, offering mentorship and guidance to younger Black people. Although the term “Auntie” has been contested within the Black community for its problematic racialized, historical connotations (similar to stereotypes like the “Mammie”), these familial connections are made possible by Aina’s position as a Black woman and strengthen the community she has built on her channel.¹⁷⁶ Aina is affectionately called Auntie by her audience, especially in comments on her videos. Aina has been described as “one of those chill rich aunties that give u the best advice.”¹⁷⁷ Being labeled both “chill” and

¹⁷⁴ Williams, 275.

¹⁷⁵ Williams, 275.

¹⁷⁶ Glanton.

¹⁷⁷ Saw Wadi, 2019, comment on Aina’s “\$7,000 Maintenance Week!” YouTube video.

“rich” is a reflection of Aina’s carefully crafted personal brand, centered on approachability and authenticity, while also promoting an aspirational glam lifestyle. Aina’s over-the-top personality is endearing and authentic; she weaves personal narratives into her videos which is balanced by beauty and lifestyle content as well as discussions on social issues. In every video, she introduces herself to her audience as “*Your* girl, Jackie Aina (emphasis added)” and sings her own theme song, which is simply her name repeated over and over. Small personal details that are unique to Aina’s channel like her intro and theme song strengthen the bond and reinforce familiarity between her and her audience. At the end of every video Aina directly addresses her audience with an open invitation to “join the Jackie Aina Family” by subscribing to her channel.

Aina is able to employ her status as an Auntie to strengthen the relationship with her audience as well as her personal brand. Aina has also described her audience as a “loyal and thriving fanbase,” which is exemplified through her engagement with her audience on her platforms.¹⁷⁸ In the comments section of her videos, Aina interacts with her audience, frequently responding to the most popular comments. While some comments are an attempt to get Aina’s attention through humor, others express adoration for Aina and gratitude for the content she produces. One user said, “I love you aunt Jackie! You exude confidence. Please continue to make me and other dark skin girls more confident about our skin and make up every day <3 <3 <3.”¹⁷⁹ This comment was liked by Aina and is pinned to the top of the video’s comment section, serving as a positive review for Aina’s content and simultaneously promoting her personal ethos of uplifting Black women. On the same video, Aina pinned another comment from Eric Phillips: “I have zero interest in makeup, but I love Jackie, she is so cool.”¹⁸⁰ This comment has over a

¹⁷⁸ Jackie Aina, “Meet Jackie,” Jackie Aina, n.d. <https://jackieaina.com/about/>.

¹⁷⁹ Bonnie Adams, 2018, comment on Aina’s “Addressing RUMORS I’ve Heard About Me” YouTube video.

¹⁸⁰ Eric Phillips, 2018, comment on Aina’s “Addressing RUMORS I’ve Heard About Me” YouTube video.

thousand likes and illustrates that Aina's videos appeal to a wider audience. Even viewers that are not interested in beauty and lifestyle content continue to watch her videos because of her authentic personality and social commentary. User Chio Amanze replied, "ok go head eric phillips! welcome to the family." What's notable about this interaction is that through avatars/profile pictures, Phillips appears to be presenting as a white man, which arguably is not Aina's target demographic. Aina likely pinned this comment to show that her videos are available to be enjoyed by everyone, even white guys. Additionally, the use of AAVE by Amanze ("ok go head") is celebratory and inviting. It signifies Amanze as a member of the Black community but also as a member of the Jackie Aina Family, a beloved community that is guarded by Aina and its members. Aina's followers and audience act as both a family and a fan community, monitoring the digital spaces and warmly welcoming newcomers, forming intimate bonds encouraged by the affective spaces Aina's channel creates. As I will discuss in the next chapter, these actions are a form of feminized relational labor Aina engages in to promote her channel across the internet, while also navigating harassment online and creating content that is focused on social justice.

Aina also interacts with her followers on Twitter and Instagram, which she uses to share memes, document her life, and also promote her brand. Followers will often repost/retweet Aina's content and tag her in posts of their own in hopes of gaining her attention.¹⁸¹ When Aina engages with social media posts from her followers, she is also engaging in self-promotion through "co-opting fan produced content."¹⁸² Her Tweet announcing the launch of Forvr Mood received over 26,000 likes as well as an influx of responses offering congratulations and sharing

¹⁸¹ Berryman and Kavka, 318.

¹⁸² Berryman and Kavka, 318.

excitement for the new brand.¹⁸³ Because Aina’s audience also behaves like a fan community, it becomes evident how Aina’s position lends to her celebrity status. User Yarely Calzada commented, “If you don’t do the mandatory Jackie intro with her, are you even a true fan??!”¹⁸⁴ It becomes apparent that Aina’s audience is in a liminal space between audience, fan, and family just as Aina is between vlogger, celebrity, and Auntie. User Blaque Thee Doll comments that she never misses one of Aina’s uploads: “When Aunt Jackie posts a video you drop everythinggg.”¹⁸⁵ From singing along to her theme song to dropping everything when she posts a new video, the comments on Aina’s videos offer a glowing example of how loyal and supportive her audience is, as well as how the Jackie Aina Family operates similarly to a fan community. Aina has established a brand identity focused on staying true to herself and her values. Through her affective role as Auntie, her audience trusts her reviews and values her opinions. Aina’s audience continues to support her because she maintains a genuine and trustworthy persona while promoting a glam aspirational lifestyle. She skillfully balances this persona with her financial successes and continues to facilitate affective bonds with her audience through her content.

“A full glam production:” Balancing “the glam life” and Realness Through Vlogging

As one of the only high-profile Black beauty vloggers on YouTube, Aina has amassed a large audience who supports her financially through purchasing her products and engaging with

¹⁸³ Banks, Naira (@jackieaina), 2020, “I can’t wait to share with all of you each scent story, the inspiration for each individual candle, and why we decided to launch with candles in the first place. there is SO much emotion and memory tied to smells; it’s an honor to share this with all of you @Forvr mood,” Twitter, July 20, 2020, 11:41 a.m.. <https://twitter.com/jackieaina/status/1285253404206354432>; Aina’s Twitter name is Naira Banks.

¹⁸⁴ Yarely Calzada, 2018, comment on Aina’s “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!” YouTube video.

¹⁸⁵ Blaque Thee Doll, 2018, comment on Aina’s “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!” YouTube video.

her content online. Despite Aina’s growing celebrity status and financial success, Aina is never accused of “selling out” or appearing inauthentic and continues to receive overwhelming support from her audience. Aina’s audience views her success as a “reward” for her labor.¹⁸⁶ Her humility and approachability have remained true throughout her career, situating her as “down-to-earth” and “real.” Aina was featured on *Allure*’s YouTube channel for an episode of “Beauty Spaces,” which offers viewers a chance to peek inside the closets and bathrooms of celebrities.¹⁸⁷ “Beauty Spaces” episodes have featured Paris Hilton, and makeup moguls Huda Kattan of Huda Beauty and Anastasia Saore of Anastasia Beverly Hills. Aina’s presence situates her as both an influencer/vlogger and a celebrity. Aina describes her bathroom, decorated with floor-to-ceiling palm leaf wallpaper, a chandelier, and a shelf of designer fragrances over the toilet, as “lavish.”¹⁸⁸ She comments on how intimate it feels to show her bathroom to the world and says, “ But that’s cool, you’re welcome in my home.” Aina continues to present a welcoming persona, balancing warmth and humor with showcasing luxury products. She shows off her medicine cabinet where a \$345 skin cream is sitting next to a menstrual cup, because, “We’re going eco-friendly.” In a comment for the video, Aina was described as “boujee yet humble.”¹⁸⁹ Aina’s branded persona is a delicate and deliberate balance between aspiration and authenticity. Her humility and humorous, down-to-earth persona are a key reason for her continued success and appeal to her audience. Aina’s audience has seen that fame and celebrity status have not changed her and thus are happy to see her successful and continue to support her.

¹⁸⁶ García-Rapp, 128.

¹⁸⁷ Allure, “Jackie Aina’s Lavish Bathroom Tour | Beauty Spaces | Allure,” YouTube, September 25, 2018, video, 6:18. <https://youtu.be/a2q3tGrCrr0>.

¹⁸⁸ Allure, ““Jackie Aina’s Lavish Bathroom Tour.””

¹⁸⁹ Kelia Serai, 2018, comment on Allure’s “Jackie Aina’s Lavish Bathroom Tour” YouTube video.

Aina calls her channel a “full glam production.”¹⁹⁰ In doing so, she acknowledges that a glamorous lifestyle is part of her personal brand and recognizes that her channel and her content are productions. Yet there are moments where audiences get to see another side of Aina. Duffy and Hund contend that digital content creators must engage in carefully curated social sharing. This is a performance of visibility that makes vloggers like Aina appear “simultaneously relatable and aspirational.”¹⁹¹ Portraying a persona that is both authentic and aspirational is most easily achieved through vlogging. Vlogs, short for “video blog,” are more casual, often lower-quality videos that follow a video diary format. While the majority of Aina’s videos are lifestyle and beauty content, she balances the more “professional” sponsored and highly edited content with vlogging and sharing carefully chosen moments from her daily life. Aina’s vlogs still have a high-quality aesthetic, but they give the impression of reality as they allow audiences an intimate look at Aina’s personal life, continuing to shape her persona as relatable and authentic.¹⁹² Vlogging is a form of carefully curated social sharing that is less structured than her lifestyle and beauty content and enables audiences to see Aina in different, more intimate, settings. Aina’s branded online persona is what P. David Marshall defines as the “public private self,” a constructed persona that is fit for online consumption, forged through affective relationships and by sharing intimate details of one’s life online.¹⁹³

Vlogs give Aina’s audience an opportunity to see her in more casual environments, where she is still able to promote her brand and values. Aina invited audiences to “follow [her] around”

¹⁹⁰ Jackie Aina, “WELP!!! I Said What I Said! Florence By Mills Review | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, October 13, 2019, video, 34:44, <https://youtu.be/WGBWVRR7X8E>.

¹⁹¹ Duffy and Hund, 7.

¹⁹² Berryman and Kavka, 314-15.

¹⁹³ P. David Marshall, “The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media,” *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 35-48; Duffy and Hund.

New York during 2018 Fashion Week with skincare brand Olay.¹⁹⁴ As part of their #FaceAnything campaign, Olay invited beauty influencers to New York to walk a runway with no makeup. The video opens with Aina backstage at the fashion show wearing oversized Gucci glasses. Her face is makeup free and her hair is wrapped up in a colorful scarf. Aina is holding the camera as she walks around backstage, talking with the other influencers and giving them all complements. Audiences responded well to being able to see Aina in a different setting, commenting on her natural beauty and confidence to walk a runway without makeup, referring to her as a “melanin goddess” and “natural melanin queen.”¹⁹⁵ One user commented that Aina was “OOZING black girl magic and confidence ❤️ [red heart] ✨ [sparkles] I love you for that Auntie 💕 [two hearts] 🙌 [clapping hands with medium-dark skin tone].”¹⁹⁶ Other comments applauded Aina for achieving her dreams, congratulating her for landing such a large partnership, and also noting Asamoah’s presence in the background as a supportive partner.¹⁹⁷ In another clip, Aina explains that each of the influencers chosen to walk the runway created a custom shirt with a “too statement.” Aina explains that her shirt says “Too Extra,” as a reclamation of critiques that Aina is over-the-top and excessive, which are comments that have historically been associated with Black femininity. Aina explains that her confidence is often viewed as arrogance which she attributes to being a Black woman, as she is often stereotyped as an “angry Black woman.” She ends with advice before walking the runway: “To anyone that tells you you’re ‘too’ anything – own it, girl.” Through vlogging, Aina is able to maintain her

¹⁹⁴ Jackie Aina, “I Walked a NYFW Show With NO MAKEUP!!!! Follow Me Around For the Week! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, October 2, 2018, video, 15:47, <https://youtu.be/p0ZtaSMsVxU>.

¹⁹⁵ Tony Montes-lopez, 2018, comment on Aina’s “I Walked a NYFW Show With NO MAKEUP!!!!” YouTube video; Diamond, 2018, comment on Aina’s “I Walked a NYFW Show With NO MAKEUP!!!!” YouTube video.

¹⁹⁶ ariontheair, 2018, comment on Aina’s “I Walked a NYFW Show With NO MAKEUP!!!!” YouTube video.

¹⁹⁷ mzmimidiva, 2018, comment on Aina’s “I Walked a NYFW Show With NO MAKEUP!!!!” YouTube video.

authentic and approachable persona, staying true to her ethos of self-love, while also being aspirational, jet-setting to big cities and working with major brands.

Aina’s glam aesthetic and love of all things luxury is a key part of her personal brand, but in order to maintain approachability with her audience, she must carefully balance showing off her markers of high class with her down-to-earth authentic persona. Aina has created numerous videos promoting the glam life, from purchasing over \$4,000 worth of skincare to try on camera, to documenting her \$7,000 monthly “maintenance” routine complete with facials and laser hair removal from her personal esthetician who makes house calls, all while wearing a Fendi top and gold chains.¹⁹⁸ In her “7,000 Maintenance Week” video she admits that she is high maintenance, but while her routine may appear to be “more than the average person,” she says that she still does less than the average YouTuber.¹⁹⁹ Here, Aina asserts herself as real by distancing herself from the stereotypical representation of vloggers as self-absorbed and inauthentic. Surprisingly, the comments were extremely supportive of Aina’s lavish routine. One user commented, “A successful black woman taking care of herself??? AbsolutELY”²⁰⁰ Other users continue to refer to her as a rich Auntie while also pointing out her large engagement ring: “So we just gone ignore that Rock on Auntie Hand. 😂 [face with tears of joy/laughing-crying]”²⁰¹ The image of the “Rich Auntie” is also associated with a financially independent Black woman who lives a lavish lifestyle, which is a cornerstone of Aina’s personal brand. Because Aina is Black, being ambitious and flaunting her wealth is received differently. In an interview with *Cosmopolitan*, she states, “I feel like it’s only with Black women that when we start leveling up and doing nice

¹⁹⁸ Jackie Aina, “Is Luxury Skincare Worth It? \$4,000 Later... | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, March 15, 2018, video, 23:55, <https://youtu.be/hyKV02Qitl8>; Jackie Aina, “\$7,000 Maintenance Week! High Maintenance Is Expensive Honey! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, October 30, 2019, video, 30:58, <https://youtu.be/OLBLvj-uanY>.

¹⁹⁹ Aina “\$7,000 Maintenance Week!”

²⁰⁰ David, 2019, comment on Aina’s “\$7,000 Maintenance Week!” YouTube video.

²⁰¹ bakari brown, 2019, comment on Aina’s “\$7,000 Maintenance Week!” YouTube video.

things for ourselves that people have a problem with it.”²⁰² Aina explains that showing her luxurious lifestyle on her channel is an intentional act stating, “I want to normalize Black people enjoying luxury without judgement and not feeling like they don’t deserve it.”²⁰³ Aina’s personal ethos of self-care, being unapologetically self-indulgent, and honoring Black women are the motivations for both her brand and partnerships. She continues to be fold these ideas into her content and her audience applauds her for it.

While most of Aina’s videos are highly edited and take place in her filming room, on rare occasions, Aina uses vlogs to share purposefully chosen intimate details of her personal life with her audience to continue to present herself as aspirational yet approachable. In a video titled “GRWM – Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!” Aina vlogged a surprise meet-up with America, who she refers to as one of her “bravest subscribers” after surviving a horrific car accident.²⁰⁴ The introduction to the video features sponsored content by NYX Cosmetics; Aina talks with her audience while showing the affordable products used to create the makeup look she is wearing that day. Aina continues to position herself as someone who remembers her humble beginnings. While she gets ready, she recalls that she once had to make a Gofundme to pay her tuition and explains that she understands firsthand how difficult it can be to ask for help.²⁰⁵ She recognizes that she is in a position of privilege and states that one way she expresses appreciation for her subscribers is by giving back. Aina explains that she often donates money to different causes because she is in a position of financial privilege, but rarely publicly reveals

²⁰² Ama Kwarteng, “Jackie Aina Blew Up ‘the Good Immigrant Daughter’ Narrative—You Really Think She Cares What the Haters Say?” *Cosmopolitan*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/a35523393/jackie-aina-profile-interview-2021/>.

²⁰³ Holmes.

²⁰⁴ Aina, “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!”

²⁰⁵ Aina, “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!”

when she does in order to avoid unwanted praise.²⁰⁶ She donated money to America's family to help with medical bills while also keeping in contact with America's sister and receiving updates on her healing and progress. Here, Aina establishes herself as rightfully motivated; she does not donate money because she desires attention, rather she wants to "help as many people as possible."²⁰⁷ In this portion of the, Aina is able to balance a heartfelt and genuine experience with a brand partnership to increase the video's financial viability while maintaining her authentic, trustworthy persona and highlighting her generosity and rightful motivations.

Aina also maintains her authenticity by filming herself outside of her beauty room and in more casual settings. The second portion of the "Meeting My Subscriber" video is filmed in a casual vlog style. After applying her makeup, Aina holds her camera up to a large mirror to show off her outfit of the day, which she describes as "casual, but still ready to party:" a bejeweled black t-shirt, cargo pants, a Louis Vuitton belt, stiletto ankle boots, and oversized Gucci sunglasses.²⁰⁸ In the mirror, audiences catch a rare glimpse of her lavishly decorated living room in the background. In the next clip, Aina and Asamoah are in the car. They exchange banter and joke and laugh with each other as Aina pulls into a parking lot of a Red Robin restaurant. She walks inside, her heels clacking and long hair swishing behind her, followed by Asamoah who is holding the camera. Although Aina looks out of place, she does not appear uncomfortable. To see Aina in full glam in a space that is associated with middle class lifestyles shows Aina's audience that she is just like them. In the next clip, Aina surprises America, her friends, and family at their table. Aina and Asamoah exchange hugs with the group, then they join their table and share a meal together. The vlog footage shows Aina's generosity and willingness to go

²⁰⁶ Aina, "GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!"

²⁰⁷ Aina, "GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!"

²⁰⁸ Aina, "GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!"

above and beyond for her audience as well as how she treats them like family. The contrast of the “everydayness” of some moments and Aina’s glam aesthetic in this video are carefully balanced to reflect Aina’s brand: she is bougie enough to wear designer clothes but humble enough to eat with her subscribers at Red Robin. Filmed moments like these are different from Aina’s typical videos. To see Aina outside of her filming room where she creates most of her content, away from the bright lights, the background music, and the editing, feels more intimate. Vlogged footage feels more intimate because Aina *chose* to share it with her audience.

As I discuss in Chapter 3, despite the gendered incitement of digital spaces to “put yourself out there!” there are serious risks for Black women who are highly visible online. As a vlogger, Aina must choose how much of her personal life to share with her audience while still presenting an authentic self. For Aina, this is most easily done through documenting her personal life with her fiancé. Asamoah has appeared on her channel in multiple videos, participating in challenges that involve doing Aina’s makeup on camera, rating her outfits, and even trying her 20-step skincare routine.²⁰⁹ Lighthearted videos like these are another way that Aina connects with her audience. Aina’s audience is able to see her in a more relaxed and natural setting, further solidifying affective bonds by offering an up-close look at her relationship with Asamoah.²¹⁰ Audiences love seeing the couple interact and regularly ask Aina to create more content with Asamoah, affectionately referring to him as “Uncle Denis.”²¹¹ In another video,

²⁰⁹ Jackie Aina, “My Boyfriend Does My Makeup LMAOOO I’m...” YouTube, December 9, 2018, video, 21:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fn7vNlOaDmc>; Jackie Aina, “Boyfriend Roasts My Fashion Nova Outfits! (He TRIED It!) | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, June 5, 2018, video, 19:44, <https://youtu.be/Bmv14pxrQa0>; Jackie Aina, “Hot Guy Does My FULL 20 STEP SKINCARE ROUTINE | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, April 30, 2019, video, 13:27, <https://youtu.be/n2bf42zjkAE>.

²¹⁰ Berryman and Kavka, 314.

²¹¹ Tabitha Marie, 2018, comment on Aina’s “GRWM - Makeup + Meeting My Subscriber!!!” YouTube video.

Aina and Asamoah visit Paris to attend Fashion Week with Dior.²¹² In one of the first clips, the audience wakes up in bed with Aina and Asamoah. Aina is not wearing a wig; her natural hair is pulled back and she is not wearing any makeup, giving the impression that the audience has “caught her in a moment of privacy.”²¹³ To see Aina and her fiancé in bed together in a private but conventionally “normal” setting works to remind her audience that she is just like them.²¹⁴ Again, these rare scenes of vulnerability are balanced with Aina’s aspirational and glam lifestyle: clips of Aina unboxing the expensive gifts she received from Dior, walking the red carpet, and backstage with makeup artists and models at the fashion show.

Vlogs featuring Aina’s close family and friends are another way that Aina can share elements of her personal life with her audience. One of Aina’s videos titled “Freaky Friday! I Swapped Lives With AlyssaForever!!!” was a partnership with NARS Cosmetics in which Aina and vlogger AlyssaForever switch lives for a day, *Freaky Friday* style.²¹⁵ The video starts off with a sketch where the two express that they wish they had each others’ lives. In the next scene, Aina wakes up in Alyssa’s house. She uses Alyssa’s makeup for a quick tutorial, tries on her wigs, and later cuddles up with her dog on the couch to watch a movie. In another video, Aina gives her mother a makeover for Mother’s Day, transforming her into a “baddie” while also promoting Google’s Pixel phone.²¹⁶ The video opens with the Aina and her mother sitting in a living room and singing Aina’s theme song together. Aina has also featured her niece, Jade, on

²¹² Jackie Aina, “Spend the Day with Me in Paris! WITH DIOR!!!!!! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, October 10, 2018, video, 17:53, <https://youtu.be/5XgAzHtGPFs>.

²¹³ Berryman and Kavka, 315.

²¹⁴ Berryman and Kavka, 315.

²¹⁵ Jackie Aina, “Freaky Friday! I Swapped Lives With AlyssaForever!!! LMAO MUST WATCH! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, June 3, 2018, video, 22:01, <https://youtu.be/QkVU98X5QYw>.

²¹⁶ Jackie Aina, “Turning My Mom Into an IG Baddie For A Day!!! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, May 7, 2019, video, 9:42, <https://youtu.be/FFJ2ikP2H8Y>.

her channel and filmed entire makeup tutorials with Jade sitting on her lap.²¹⁷ Seeing Aina with her family creates an “extension of familial intimacy,” inviting audiences to identify with Aina in the literal and metaphorical Auntie role she exemplifies on screen.²¹⁸ Through sharing intimate details of her life with her audience, Aina’s private self becomes what Berryman and Kavka describe as a public, “promotional self.”²¹⁹ The vlogs I have discussed in this section are roughly scripted and clearly edited. They all also feature sponsored content. Yet, to see Aina in different settings, interacting with her friends and family offers her audience another glimpse into Aina’s life and relationships. Vlogs situate Aina’s audience as part of the Jackie Aina Family, granted access to the most privileged and intimate details of her life, which further strengthens Aina’s bond with her audience.

The success and audience response to Aina’s videos with Asamoah shows that there is a demand for more content featuring the couple. In 2019, Aina gave her audience access to one of her most personal moments to date: her engagement. Aina uploaded a highly produced video of Asamoah’s surprise proposal from an undisclosed waterfront location complete with candles, rose petals, and a private saxophonist playing softly in the background.²²⁰ It is just Asamoah and Aina in the room, but by posting the video online, the entire Jackie Aina Family was in attendance – the video has racked up over 400,000 views. The video’s comment section is wildly celebratory, filled with red heart emojis and comments gushing over Aina and Asamoah’s “classic Black love,” and expressing appreciation that the couple allowed her audience to be a

²¹⁷ Jackie Aina, “Doing Makeup With MY BABY!!! She Was SO Over It LMAO | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, May 14, 2019, video, 15:30, <https://youtu.be/ey6aYXwgijc>.

²¹⁸ Berryman and Kavka, 314.

²¹⁹ Berryman and Kavka, 313.

²²⁰ Denis and Jackie, “She Said Yes | Proposal Video,” YouTube, August 14, 2019, video, 2:28, https://youtu.be/RD3_J-KIYfo.

part of such a special and private moment.²²¹ While proposals and weddings are intimate ceremonies reserved for family and close friends, sharing details of her engagement and wedding planning process online allows Aina to create space for all of her audience to attend.

While publicly sharing the details of her proposal with her audience is an opportunity for Aina to strengthen her relationship with her affective community, it is also a strategic branding choice. Berryman and Kavka explain that there is a level of self-awareness to the construction of an intimate persona, achieved through sharing intimate details of one's life online. It was important that Aina's proposal be filmed, not just to preserve a significant milestone, but also to be shared online. Aina anticipated that her proposal would be highly viewed and ultimately extremely profitable.²²² In addition, Aina used this event to engage in cross-platform marketing. Aina's announcement post on Instagram featuring a video of her ring and a clip from the proposal video has over 39,000 comments.²²³ The post was a way for Aina to share her engagement with her audience, but also to drive users from Instagram to YouTube to view the full proposal video. Aina and Asamoah had a couple's photoshoot in Greece to commemorate their engagement, and the images were used as content for Aina's Instagram feed. Aina is able to turn her engagement and plans for a grandiose wedding into content for her audience to consume and to promote her other projects.

The anticipation surrounding Aina's nuptials has allowed her to promote wedding-themed content to her audience. Aina was the first YouTuber to be featured in *The Knot*, a bridal

²²¹ xoPrimrose, 2019, comment on Denis and Jackie's "She Said Yes" YouTube video; High Brown, 2019, comment on Denis and Jackie's "She Said Yes" YouTube video.

²²² Berryman and Kavka, 316.

²²³ Jackie Aina (@jackieaina), 2019, "the day I said yes 💍," Instagram post, August 10, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B0_W0wUAm4z/?igshid=19llva98vpgd9.

magazine, where she shares beauty tips to help brides look radiant on their wedding day.²²⁴

While this is a common discussion topic for celebrity brides, Aina was also asked to comment on the need for diversity in the wedding industry. Aina states that being a Black woman on the cover of *The Knot* shows, “How important it is for Black girls to see other women who look like them being represented in media and being happy and being healthy and living their best lives.”²²⁵ Readers are reminded that a Black woman’s presence on the cover of a wedding magazine is significant because it is rare. Aina is constantly looked to as a role model and is asked to engage in emotional labor by calling upon her own experiences of marginalization. Aina’s role is not just that of a beauty guru but also a Black woman who is widely known for speaking out against racial injustice. Though the two roles do not seem related, she must always embody both.

To be successful, vloggers must merge their public and private lives into their branded identity or persona, sharing intimate details of their personal lives with their audiences. When asked when she feels most like herself, Aina described her best self as “just me,” with no makeup and natural hair, with her fiancé and the people who know her most intimately and not as “Jackie Aina the brand.”²²⁶ Through an analysis of Aina’s content, it is clear that she is aware of the difference between her branded persona and her most intimate self, not that they are two separate people/personas, but that one is more exterior or public than the other. Aina deliberately selects elements from both to craft her “public private self,” a seamless amalgamation of her many personas: Aina the celebrity, Aina the influencer/brand, and Aina the “regular girl.”²²⁷

²²⁴ Kwarteng.

²²⁵ Shelley Brown, “YouTube Star Jackie Aina on Why Beauty Diversity Matters,” *The Knot*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.theknot.com/content/jackie-aina-wedding>.

²²⁶ Brown.

²²⁷ Berryman and Kavka, 316.

Conclusion

Too Faced Co-Founder and CCO Jerrod Blandino described Aina as “glittery and sparkly and fashionable and fun,” and in the same sentence also described her as a warrior who is not afraid to fight for what is right.²²⁸ Aina’s personal website states that she is known for her “insider tips and unapologetic glam—as well as her signature humor, honesty, and message-driven content.”²²⁹ All of these components are a clear part of Aina’s branded self, which translates across the content she produces and the products she makes, and works to situate her as authentic, allowing her to build a wholly supportive affective community. By maintaining humility and an ethos centered on social justice, Aina continues to stay relatable to her audience, amidst her growing fame, financial success, and celebrity status. In addition to building an authentic and trustworthy persona while honoring Black women and decentering hegemonic beauty standards, Aina is known for speaking out against racism and incorporating her experiences as a Black woman into the content on her channel. As I will explore in the next chapter, this hypervisibility has granted Aina access to a strong affective community, but as a Black woman online, it also comes with great risk.

This chapter has explored how Aina performs entrepreneurial femininity through rhetorics of passion and creativity, promoting the “glam life” and sharing intimate details of her personal life with her audience. One of the bloggers interviewed by Duffy explained that it is more difficult today to tell the difference between bloggers and models, and with the highly visual and stylized influencer culture, the same could be said for vloggers like Aina.²³⁰ From being featured in magazines like *Essence*, *Glamour*, and *Cosmopolitan* to starring in ad

²²⁸ Tietjen, “Jackie Aina Wins Influencer of the Year.”

²²⁹ Aina, “Meet Jackie.”

²³⁰ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 112.

campaigns for products she designed herself, Aina also promotes the “glam life,” which is carefully integrated into her personal brand and aesthetic through her content and deliberate branding choices. While Aina’s fame and wealth continue to grow, because glam has been part of her personal brand and aesthetic from the beginning, it cannot be separated from her online persona, which lends to her authenticity. Aina’s content continues to appeal to the everyday person because she still represents herself as one. Through continuing to stay humble and down-to-earth, Aina’s “realness” achieved through her relatable persona and her affective connections with her audience continue to establish her as a “regular girl” who happens to be famous.²³¹

²³¹ Aina and Schallon.

CHAPTER 3: “YOU’RE HERE FOR THE MAKEUP AND FOR THE TEA:”
DIGITAL HARASSMENT AND ACTIVISM THROUGH BEAUTY AND LIFESTYLE
CONTENT

Introduction: Black Women and Digital Spaces

Performances of Black identity are often policed through politics of respectability. According to André Brock, the cultural belief that “one stands for many” in the Black community stems from the fear that large-scale performances of Blackness can reflect poorly on the entire Black community.²³² Jackie Aina was the first dark-skinned Black woman in the beauty genre on YouTube to reach one million subscribers.²³³ As one of the only Black beauty and lifestyle vloggers with a following of this size and a reach of this magnitude, she is often looked at as “the only one.”²³⁴ Aina is expected to be perfect and is under an immense amount of pressure to set an example for other Black women because of her success. In an interview with *Refinery 29*, she alludes to respectability politics by explaining that there are expectations to be a “cooperative, well mannered, docile Black person” to avoid being replaced in the industry.²³⁵ Aina says that she used to adopt a “‘customer service’ Jackie persona” because she thought it would help her appeal to a wider audience, a clear example of how Black women code-switch in the workplace.²³⁶ A vlogger’s authentic persona is credited in their success story to frame the industry as appealing and accessible to everyone. But the performance of this persona is further

²³² André Brock, “‘Who Do You Think You Are?’” 18-20.

²³³ E! News, “Jackie Aina: From U.S. Army Vet to Beauty Influencer | Just The Sip | E! News.” YouTube, February 26, 2020, video, 12:16, <https://youtu.be/lgotbZ3Q9Uo>.

²³⁴ Thatiana Diaz, “Jackie Aina Breaks Her Silence on Bullying, Black Influencers, & Deleting Her Twitter,” *Refinery29*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/09/24/1710/jackie-aina-twitter-drama-black-beauty-influencer-interview>; E! News.

²³⁵ Diaz.

²³⁶ Underwood; Dillon Thompson, “News Anchor Shares Stark Video Comparing Her ‘On-Air’ Voice to Her Regular Voice: ‘Slight Difference,’” *Yahoo! News*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/now/trend-tiktok-users-showing-off-170849885.html>.

complicated by the intersections of gender and race. For Aina there is a delicate balance between challenging historical representations of Black womanhood and crafting a “palatable” online persona in order to become successful. As I have already begun to uncover, Black women’s visibility in digital spaces is highly precarious. This chapter focuses on the structures of social media platforms that afford Black women vloggers like Aina radical community but can also render Black women extremely vulnerable.

Online, Black women are able to openly discuss, contest, and affirm facets of Black identity in spaces outside of dominant hegemonic media culture. In the previous chapter, I highlighted how Aina balances “having it all” and crafting an authentic, trustworthy persona online. Aina also uses her channel to openly discuss her experiences as a dark-skinned Black woman in the beauty industry and centers Black femininity by challenging hegemonic beauty standards in her content. These forms of labor are feminized and often uncompensated. Lawson compares the aforementioned digital labor of “archiving” and “curating” content to feminized craft work and engaging with audiences to the emotional labor of preserving histories.²³⁷ As I will continue to discuss, this labor is also racialized and has additional layers of risk and possibility for Black women.

The curatorial use of social media by the Black community is inspired by African traditions of oral histories. Williams contends that communal gathering online is a digital iteration of Black tradition and another way that shared cultural knowledge is passed down.²³⁸ Black communities use digital spaces to engage in the production of a collective cultural identity, deciding what is to be remembered and how. Social media allows a record to be kept of all

²³⁷ Lawson, “Skin Deep.”

²³⁸ Williams, 289.

interactions.²³⁹ As Black users continue to create their own representations of multifaceted Black identities and perspectives online, cultural knowledge and information can be easily disseminated and archived. Online platforms provide visibility for Black women that can foster community and mobilize activist work.²⁴⁰ But there are risks for being a hypervisible Black woman online. This chapter illuminates the risks of hypervisibility online, as platforms render Black women vulnerable to harassment, and discusses the additional labor Black women like Aina must perform to maintain an online presence. I also explore how social justice is a cornerstone of Aina’s content and how advocating for racial equity is another key component of Aina’s persona that helps her maintain her authenticity and continue to be successful online.

A Digital Tug-of-War: Hypervisibility and Harassment Online

There is a fine line between visibility and vulnerability.²⁴¹ Visibility is a requirement for vloggers; the more active and visible you are online, the easier it becomes to gain followers and subscribers. The culture that encourages visibility also justifies abuse and harassment that women-identified digital content creators receive online. As their careers focus heavily on physical appearance, vloggers’ appearances are frequently scrutinized and held to socially constructed standards of acceptable femininity. This abuse is often justified because it is considered part of the job. For Black women online, the bar is even higher, as femininity is rife with racialized and gendered stereotypes. Thus, Black women’s bodies are subject to even more policing and surveillance than white women’s. The incitement of digital culture industries to “put yourself out there” as a means to success poses additional risks for Black women.

²³⁹ Williams, 279.

²⁴⁰ Lawson, “Platform Vulnerabilities,” 821.

²⁴¹ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 129.

As a vlogger, Aina's career is inextricably linked to her visible identity as a Black woman. Platforms like YouTube operate with an assumed white audience, and beauty and lifestyle content privilege a proximity to white femininity. Aina has addressed the double standards Black influencers face that can be attributed to both racial and gender identity: "There are two layers: There's being Black, and there's being a Black woman."²⁴² Here, Aina is addressing interlocking oppression and marginalization. Aina describes her experience as a constant "tug-of-war."²⁴³ Her Blackness is constantly policed as being "too Black" or "not Black enough," and her appearance, especially her skin and hair, is constantly critiqued against hegemonic white beauty standards. As a hypervisible Black woman, Aina's gender and racial identities intersect and compound, affecting her work online differently and adding an immense amount of pressure that white content creators do not experience. Aina has deleted her social media accounts multiple times because of online harassment due to her race. Brooke Erin Duffy explains that many (white) content creators recognize that dealing with hate and trolls is part of the job.²⁴⁴ But for white creators, these comments are often not direct, violent attacks on their racial identity.

Aina is open about the harassment she receives online, and directly addresses it in her content. Aina responds to harassment firsthand in a video titled "Addressing Rumors I've Heard About Me."²⁴⁵ This is a popular video trend on YouTube in which vloggers respond to rumors and assumptions that circulate about them online. The rumors are submitted by their social media followers and the videos are usually fun and lighthearted. What's different about Aina's video is

²⁴² Diaz.

²⁴³ Jackie Aina (@jackieaina), 2020, "watch this," Instagram video, June 30, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CCFJvBpg2_d/?igshid=d2slhlsr420.

²⁴⁴ Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, 26.

²⁴⁵ Aina, "Addressing RUMORS I've Heard About Me."

that the rumors and accusations are almost all related to her identity as a Black woman. Some of the rumors were that Aina is “stuck up in real life,” that she has gotten a nose job, bleaches her skin, lies about her heritage, and “does nothing for Black people.” These rumors rely heavily on stereotypes and interrogate Aina’s identity as a Black woman. To assume that Aina bleaches her skin or has gotten a nose job implies that Aina is unhappy with her Blackness and physical features and has actively sought to change them to appear more white. The rumors about Aina’s personality are most likely based on the “angry Black woman” stereotype prevalent throughout the media as well as the assumption that influencers and vloggers that have large online presences are inauthentic. Aina also explains that the rumor that she bleaches her skin is often said about many prominent Black vloggers and is a comment she hears frequently.

Aina’s content offers a refusal of hegemonic beauty standards as well as an open forum to discuss her experiences as a Black woman online. This becomes additional labor that Aina must engage in to defend her identity and combat harassment online. In the “Rumors” video, Aina explains that she has recently stopped contouring her nose, a makeup technique that makes the nose appear smaller and thinner. She explains that features that are common on darker complexions like hyperpigmentation, larger lips, and a larger nose are not a “burden” or an “inconvenience,” and instead of being corrected with makeup, can be accentuated and made “even more beautiful.”²⁴⁶ Although the content is serious, the video remains lighthearted because Aina responds to these rumors in a humorous way. This video further illuminates the social construction of Black women as invincible while also being expected to endure, and even laugh off, harassment regarding their physical appearance and their identities. Aina explains that there

²⁴⁶ Jackie Aina, “Stop Doing THAT To Your Face...Start Doing THIS! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, April 3, 2020, video, 33:29, <https://youtu.be/Y5f3gS3PjJ4>.

seems to be an assumption that because she has a lot of followers, she is “immune to abuse.”²⁴⁷ Aina is often referred to as “superhuman” and “brave,” which she says makes her extremely uncomfortable.²⁴⁸ This language perpetuates the harmful “strong Black woman” trope which presents Black women, especially Black public figures, as invincible, which Aina calls “a dangerous lie.”²⁴⁹ As outlined in the examples above, Black women like Aina are socially expected to perform emotional labor and withstand harassment while maintaining a strong, impenetrable exterior. The trope of the “strong Black woman,” while appearing to applaud Black women for their resilience, insidiously justifies violence against Black women under the assumption that they do not feel pain or cannot be harmed in the same ways as white women. This example also serves as a reminder that the comments Aina receives are justified because Black women are perceived as invincible and non-human, thus able to handle any critique, harassment, or even violence.

Aina’s status as a beauty and lifestyle vlogger invites constant comments about her body and physical appearance under the assumption that her audience is entitled access to all aspects of her life. The incitement to “put yourself out there” and maintain a state of hypervisibility online implies some additional labor and risks of harassment for white content creators but has harmful implications for Black women online. In June 2020, Aina posted an IGTV video on Instagram in response to unsolicited comments she received about her body and skin after posting a video of herself in a bikini.²⁵⁰ It is common for vloggers to post content with their full

²⁴⁷ Diaz.

²⁴⁸ Carlos; Kara Nesvig, “Jackie Aina Doesn’t Want to Be Called ‘Brave’ Because of Her Skin,” *Teen Vogue*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/jackie-aina-skin-comments-response>.

²⁴⁹ Jackie Aina, “Reacting to HATE COMMENTS ASMR | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, April 17, 2018, video, 16:30, <https://youtu.be/efXyh1ifCLM>.

²⁵⁰ Jackie Aina, “watch this.”

bodies shown, especially in partnerships with clothing companies. But for Aina, the comments about her physical appearance were directly related to her Blackness. In addition to body-shaming comments, users suggested ways for Aina to lighten darker parts of her skin, like her armpits and thighs. Aina was attacked because her body does not conform to hegemonic standards of beauty defined by a proximity to white femininity. This example illustrates how the harassment Aina experiences is more than skin deep; the comments were personal attacks on Aina's appearance, directly related to her Black identity and expressions of Black womanhood. Aina's physical features and markers of Blackness are continuously scrutinized against hegemonic standards of white femininity and beauty. The harassment Aina faces is a direct result of sexism and misogyny that appears to be justified in online spaces, especially for content creators because it is an assumed part of the job, but it is exacerbated due to the lack of support for vulnerable marginalized groups on online platforms. The labor of navigating harassment online is compounded by the expectation that women-identified digital content creators are always "on" and visible, constantly working, creating content, and engaging affectively with their audiences. This ultimately equates to additional hours of uncompensated physical and emotional labor.

Another form of labor that Aina must engage in involves managing online harassment itself. According to Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, many YouTubers are hesitant to moderate, ban, or delete comments because it is "counter to the ethos of openness that supposedly distinguishes participatory culture."²⁵¹ There are also has social, economic, and algorithmic risks.²⁵² Turning off comments for videos limits overall engagement and affects the video's

²⁵¹ Burgess and Green, 119.

²⁵² Lawson, "Skin Deep," 13.

visibility and performance, which has a financial impact on vloggers.²⁵³ Furthermore, these actions require additional labor. Creating filters for comments, deleting comments, and blocking users still elicits exposure to abusive language and hate-speech.²⁵⁴ In an industry so heavily focused on physical appearance, there is an expectation that digital content creators will deal with trolls and unsolicited comments. But Black women are especially vulnerable to additional harassment online due to their multiple marginalized identities. Furthermore, the emotional toll that it takes to endure this violence while also managing harassment online (oftentimes without any formal solutions from the platforms themselves) is emotionally taxing, uncompensated, physical and emotional labor that Black women must engage in.

Signifying, Spilling Tea, and Navigating Algorithmic Bias

Despite incessant harassment and policing of her racial and gender identities, Aina continues to use her channel to discuss issues relevant to the Black community, which illustrates how hypervisibility can be an advantage. Tressie McMillan Cottom and Karen Gregory state that hypervisibility online surprisingly affords marginalized groups privacy. They contend that social media have a “malleable hypervisibility:” “affording privacy while also designing the platform around social signals” like images, discourse, language, and affective practices, which provide a sense of safety.²⁵⁵ Black users online engage in encoding and decoding practices through social and cultural signifiers which allow them to locate one another and secure community. Thus, hypervisibility means that it can be easier to find and be found by other members of a

²⁵³ Lawson, “Skin Deep,” 12.

²⁵⁴ Lawson, “Skin Deep,” 12; Lawson, “Platform Vulnerabilities,” 820.

²⁵⁵ Cottom and Gregory, 222-223.

community. This also means that Aina must perform additional labor to protect her space and communities from trolls.

Just as code-switching happens through offline discourse, interactions online are also “coded.”²⁵⁶ As I discussed in the previous chapter, Aina frequently uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Black slang on her channel and in the products she creates. This use of AAVE and culturally relevant language and imagery honors Black culture and ensures a level of protection to her space. Aina integrates gifs and video clips from Black popular media throughout her videos and incorporates AAVE terms popularized by queer people of color like “slayed,” “snatched,” and “spilling tea.”²⁵⁷ According to Catherine Knight Steele, Black women’s online discourse, particularly gossip, serves both social and subversive functions. “Spilling tea” is an AAVE term popularized in queer communities of color that refers to gossiping, which Steele argues is a form of resistance against dominant and oppressive systems.²⁵⁸ Having “hot tea” or tea to spill is also a form of cultural capital.²⁵⁹ Aina adopts AAVE in her videos and also serves hot tea to her audience who await with empty cups for her honest reviews, humor, and authentic personality. AAVE is a form of signifying which Aina uses to protect her space and maintain an authentic and trustworthy persona. As digital spaces make it difficult to discern the identities of their users, language becomes a way of signifying one’s belonging to a specific social group. AAVE is used to signify Blackness and to help Black folks find each other and build community online. These intentionally coded interactions are akin to a virtual code-switching, where those who lack the cultural knowledge are excluded from the

²⁵⁶ Williams, 279.

²⁵⁷ Jackie Aina, “Drugstore Makeup Is Coming for Our NECKS! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, October 7, 2019, video, 27:33, <https://youtu.be/ppB8JWCyZwo>.

²⁵⁸ Steele, 76.

²⁵⁹ Steele, 75.

space.²⁶⁰ Although this does not make Aina’s channel immune to trolls, it does protect her space, as those without the cultural knowledge cannot participate effectively.²⁶¹

Aina engages in feminized labor through situating herself as the head of the “Jackie Aina Family,” an affectionate term for her community of subscribers. In constructing an affective community, Aina assumes a Black maternal role, while also using feminized forms of communication like gossip/“spilling tea” along with AAVE to protect her community from harassment. Aina comments that her audience watches her videos for a few key reasons: “the makeup and the tea,” “the personality and the technique.”²⁶² In the previous chapter, I explored how Aina builds affective community online that resembles a familial relationship. By establishing herself at the head of the Jackie Aina Family, Aina is engaging in relational labor, which Nancy K. Baym describes as both affective and economic.²⁶³ Aina’s audience not only financially supports her through purchasing products she creates, but also through engaging with her videos. Aina invites viewers to join the Jackie Aina family by subscribing to her channel and encourages viewers to enable notifications for her channel so they are alerted whenever she uploads a video. These subscribers are affectionately referred to as the “notification squad.” “Squad” is a slang/AAVE term that refers to “an informal group of individuals with a common identity and a sense of solidarity.”²⁶⁴ More recently, vloggers have been encouraging users to enable notifications because the algorithm frequently hides new uploads in users’ feeds. Aina has openly critiqued social media algorithms on her channel, even creating a video titled, “How to

²⁶⁰ Amanda Nell Edgar and Ashton Toone, “‘She Invited Other People to That Space’: Audience Habitus, Place, and Social Justice in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*,” *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 96.

²⁶¹ Williams, 279.

²⁶² Jackie Aina, “UNPOPULAR OPINIONS: Your Fave IG Fashion Brands!! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, March 27, 2019, video, 28:02. <https://youtu.be/2BbCA76NfjM>; E! News.

²⁶³ Baym.

²⁶⁴ Urban Dictionary, “Urban Dictionary: Squad,” <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=squad>.

Fix Your Social Media Algorithm.”²⁶⁵ She laments, “As a Black content creator even with 300 million subscribers, like, I still have to promote and give ways on how to find my content. It’s real out here in these streets.”²⁶⁶ Aina’s direct address and call-to-action at the end of each of her videos offers her audience a family bond by engaging with her content and combats YouTube’s algorithm to push her videos to more viewers.

Since YouTube was adopted by Google in 2006, Google’s search engine functions have been incorporated into YouTube’s algorithms. Search engines reinforce racist biases, privilege certain search terms, and work to promote advertisements and sponsored content to users.²⁶⁷ YouTube’s algorithms use Google’s search engine technology to rank videos by popularity, or what the algorithm thinks the assumed audience *wants* to see.²⁶⁸ The high view counts on YouTube’s most popular videos can be attributed to the platform’s algorithms.²⁶⁹ There is no question that the algorithms are pushing specific videos to the top of users’ feeds. Aina describes algorithms as a game. She is working against technology that was created with implicit bias towards Black creators while also finding ways to use the algorithms to her advantage and ensure that her content is successful and profitable.²⁷⁰

Navigating YouTube’s algorithms is imperative for Aina to maintain visibility and keep her channel relevant and financially viable. Aina recognizes that the platform’s algorithms create barriers between her content and a wider audience, but her affective community is one way that she fights back. In an interview with *E! News*, she explains that YouTube’s visual features can

²⁶⁵ Jackie Aina, “How to Fix Your Social Media Algorithm | Jackie Aina.” YouTube, October 6, 2020, video, 28:58. <https://youtu.be/dafl1AmdF70>.

²⁶⁶ Jackie Aina, “Nostalgia Makeup: Recreating a 2009 Makeup Look 🍷 | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, November 21, 2020, video, 19:39. https://youtu.be/IwVp_FQFSJo.

²⁶⁷ van Dijck.

²⁶⁸ van Dijck, 125; Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*; Bivens and Haimson.

²⁶⁹ van Dijck, 117.

²⁷⁰ Aina, “How to Fix Your Social Media Algorithm.”

help or hinder creators. The thumbnail images that users see while scrolling through their feeds are the only preview of a video they see unless they continue to watch it.²⁷¹ Aina stated that dark-skinned vloggers “don't appeal to light, whiter audiences”²⁷² She explains many white users will not click on her videos solely because of the thumbnail; they either do not want to see a Black woman on their screen, or they feel that because Aina is Black, the content is not relevant to them.²⁷³ While this may not be a direct act of racism, internalized biases and attitudes have a significant impact on the algorithm, pushing Black creators farther away from the top of search results due to a lack of engagement.

As a Black woman, the stakes are much higher in a fight against the algorithm for visibility. An increase in engagement has significant financial and career implications for Aina. Increased views and engagement increases revenue earned from the video (both through ads and affiliate links to content promoted in the video) and can lead to more exposure and recognition, which can result in more sponsorships/partnerships and opportunities.²⁷⁴ In one video, Aina points to the camera and speaks directly to the viewers that are unsubscribed: “You keep coming back for every upload. That’s what analytics are for, I see you.”²⁷⁵ Aina’s breaking of the fourth wall and acknowledgement of YouTube’s algorithmic functions further illustrates the importance of engagement. She is acutely aware of the uphill battle against the algorithm for visibility. Because of Aina’s affective labor, her audience is willing to engage with her videos, not only to boost views and support Aina financially, but also to retain their membership in the Jackie Aina

²⁷¹ E! News.

²⁷² Shammara Lawrence, “Jackie Aina on Why Creating Diversity in Beauty Should Never Be Just One Person’s Job,” *Allure*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.allure.com/story/jackie-aina-interview-diversity-and-inclusivity-in-youtube-beauty-community>.

²⁷³ E! News.

²⁷⁴ Berryman and Kavka, 316.

²⁷⁵ Aina, “Addressing RUMORS I’ve Heard About Me.”

Family.²⁷⁶ As I have discussed in this section, Aina engages in emotional labor to cultivate the Jackie Aina Family and uphold her branded persona. She also engages in physical and emotional labor required to navigate platform harassment and biased algorithms while maintaining malleable visibility. The next section will explore another component of Aina’s branded identity: her videos about racism and social justice.

“It’s always ‘dark girl hour’ on my channel:” Activism and Advocacy through Beauty Content

Aina’s profession as a beauty vlogger is inextricably linked to her intersecting identities as a Black woman. Much as spaces like Black Twitter are situated within a structure that operates within dominant hegemonic ideology, Aina’s YouTube channel situates Black identity within a white cultural space.²⁷⁷ Although her channel focuses on beauty and lifestyle content and adopts familiar elements used by non-Black vloggers, for Aina, the personal is always political. Intersectionality is at the core of her work and identity is always the focus of the content she creates. Aina’s videos address complex issues of racism, colorism, and post-race ideology in an accessible way. Aina uses a Black cyberfeminist approach to her channel, centering her identity and lived experiences in her content and using her personal narratives to create change. From videos discussing colorism and skin bleaching to a colorblind makeup tutorial, Aina’s channel is a space where she openly discusses her experiences as a Black woman, specifically a Black woman in the YouTube beauty community.

²⁷⁶ Berryman and Kavka; García-Rapp.

²⁷⁷ Edgar and Toone, 89.

Aina has been dubbed a “champion for people of color in the beauty industry.”²⁷⁸ In an interview with *The Washington Post*, she credited her success to her ability to combine discussions of topics she cares about with beauty and lifestyle content.²⁷⁹ While beauty/lifestyle content and advocacy are clearly two of Aina’s passions and cornerstones of her personal brand, this is also an intentional move: Aina’s presentation of content prevents her from being labeled an “angry Black woman” on a soapbox, and enables her to target a wider audience through her beauty and lifestyle videos. This balance of content has proven to be profitable; Aina’s videos discussing racial issues have received as many views as her videos exclusively focused on beauty and lifestyle content.

Recognizing her large platform, Aina has worked to carve out a digital space for Black people to feel beautiful and appreciated while illustrating that Black identity is not monolithic. Aina is openly proud of her Nigerian heritage and has incorporated her Nigerian-American identity into her content. Aina has uploaded videos wearing Nigerian fashion, comparing popular Nigerian makeup trends, and using only makeup from African-owned brands.²⁸⁰ She also frequently promotes and features products from small Black and African-owned businesses on her channel. Aina seeks to use her platform to highlight the diversity of Black identity and explore the intersections of Blackness, gender, ethnicity, and religion. In a video titled “Full Face of Muslim Owned/Halal Beauty Products Tutorial!,” Aina creates a full-face makeup look with Halal and Muslim-owned brands. She promotes Pearl Daisy, a hijab and modestwear company

²⁷⁸ Simmons.

²⁷⁹ Amber Ferguson, “Jackie Aina May Teach You Makeup Skills, but Really, She’s Crusading for Black Women,” *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/04/21/jackie-aina-may-teach-you-little-makeup-really-shes-crusading-black-women/>.

²⁸⁰ Jackie Aina, “Nigerian VS American Makeup | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, November 4, 2019, video, 28:52, <https://youtu.be/YL9aPJjBXvw>; Jackie Aina, “African-Owned Makeup Brands You’re SLEEPING ON! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, July 22, 2020, video, 26:27 <https://youtu.be/R5IFh3mxMU4>.

founded by vlogger Amena Khan. Aina says she loves Khan because she “fearlessly rocks her faith.”²⁸¹ Aina used to live in Kuwait and expresses that she wants to do something special for her Muslim audience, especially during Eid. In another video Aina invites Halima Aden, the first Hijabi high-fashion model, to try out different head wraps and hijabs on her channel, promoting Aden’s new line of hijabs.²⁸² Aina and Aden share their experiences with head coverings and modest dressing and discuss cultural appropriation and the “oppressed Hijabi” stereotype. Aina’s authentic and warm personality turns her beauty room into a neutral space that allows for two Black women to engage in open dialogue about identity. By showcasing diverse Black representations, Aina continuously challenges preconceived hegemonic notions about Blackness and beauty. Celebrating Blackness is a tenet of Aina’s personal ethos and brand, which is evident in the products she makes and the content of her videos.

While using her channel to explore identity, Aina has engaged in discussions about harmful discourses like post-racism and colorblindness. In an interview with *Refinery 29*, Aina explains that she has received backlash from (white) viewers who claim she is “too radical” because she openly and frequently talks about race.²⁸³ Colorblind rhetoric falls within post-race ideology that wrongfully assumes that racism has been “solved.” Sarah Florini explains that colorblindness reduces race to an individual characteristic “divorced from politics, histories of oppression, and economic opportunities.”²⁸⁴ By depoliticizing race, colorblind responses from users online discredit Aina’s experiences of racism as a Black woman by implying that racism is

²⁸¹ Jackie Aina, “Full Face of Muslim Owned/Halal Beauty Products Tutorial! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, July 15, 2018, video, 21:28, <https://youtu.be/WJisM0jn7kU>.

²⁸² Jackie Aina, “Tying Headwraps, Turbans, and Hijabs! With Halima Aden,” YouTube, September 20, 2019, video, 28:37, <https://youtu.be/B37yVO5DXRI>.

²⁸³ Diaz.

²⁸⁴ Sarah Florini, “This Week in Blackness and the Construction of Blackness in Independent Digital Media,” in *Race and Gender in Electronic Media: Content, Context, Culture*, ed. Rebecca Ann Lind (Routledge, 2016), 331-32.

now simply a “personal problem.” Aina explicitly addresses colorblindness in a video titled “I Don’t See Color – A Makeup Tutorial.”²⁸⁵ She starts by addressing complaints that she talks about race too much on her channel and that she is known on the internet as the girl that only cares about “‘her people’ [air quotes].”²⁸⁶ She states that she cannot understand why it makes so many people uncomfortable to see a Black woman talking openly about her identity and experiences, especially when it relates to her career as a beauty vlogger. Throughout the video, Aina poses satirical questions to deconstruct colorblind rhetoric like, “If you don’t see color, then what do you do at a traffic light?”²⁸⁷ This simplified example illustrates that being able to refuse to see color and recognize difference has material consequences.

In the makeup tutorial that follows, Aina offers viewers a “visual representation of what it’s like to ignore color” by doing her makeup without looking at the colors of the products she uses.²⁸⁸ The video turns to black and white and she begins the tutorial, talking through the application of foundation, concealer, powders, mascara, and lipstick. With a full face on, she snaps her fingers and color returns to the video. Aina’s makeup looks clownish: her foundation is too dark, her lips are gray, her eyebrows are red, and there is bright yellow powder under her eyes. She addresses the audience, “When you say stuff like ‘I don’t see color,’ you just end up looking like this - silly as hell.”²⁸⁹ Aina uses the rest of the video to unpack the “flawed thinking” behind colorblind rhetoric.²⁹⁰ She explains that being able to ignore race is a privilege that people of color do not have and connects colorblindness to larger systemic issues like police

²⁸⁵ Jackie Aina, “I Don’t See Color – a Makeup Tutorial.” YouTube, January 24, 2018. video, 13:41.

https://youtu.be/t3z_pdr6z8w.

²⁸⁶ Aina, “I Don’t See Color.”

²⁸⁷ Aina, “I Don’t See Color.”

²⁸⁸ Aina, “I Don’t See Color.”

²⁸⁹ Aina, “I Don’t See Color.”

²⁹⁰ Aina, “I Don’t See Color.”

violence: “Why do you get to ignore all of this chocolate? ...The cops don’t ignore my skin color.” Race is inseparable from Aina’s identity as a Black woman and as a vlogger. A refusal to acknowledge difference or ignore color is a refusal to recognize the ways that those with privilege uphold or benefit from systems of oppression.

Aina explains that every time she turns on her camera, she’s “doing the work.”²⁹¹ Aina is not only engaging in labor through content creation, but she is also producing content with an emphasis on social justice and using her platform to make real change. Being on YouTube for over a decade, she explains that she created her channel to challenge what the beauty industry deemed acceptable for women of color. She states that she understands what it feels like to not be “seen,” and that Black and dark-skinned vloggers have to work harder to be taken seriously and ultimately be successful. She offers an example of a white vlogger with a history of racism who continues to be supported by a brand, even after filming a video throwing their product in the trash, whereas vloggers of color are more frequently punished for sharing their honest opinions or critiques of products by being removed from a brand’s PR list. Aina establishes herself as rightfully motivated by asserting that she does not create videos for free makeup and would never hold back an honest opinion for the sake of a relationship with a brand. Instead, she is using her platform and content to shed light on the hypocrisy in the beauty community by showing that brands do not prioritize consumers or vloggers of color.

Aina also responds to current events and pop culture on her channel, weaving in personal narratives to further discuss how issues of race connect to the beauty industry and have a material effect on marginalized groups. In a video titled “We Need to Talk About SKIN

²⁹¹ Aina, “I Don’t See Color.”

BLEACHING,” Aina responds to a collaboration between celebrity Blac Chyna and “skincare” company Whitenicious, for a skin lightening cream marketed in African countries.²⁹² Aina continues the discussion while doing her makeup, explaining that the prevalence of skin bleaching is directly related to colorism, which is a global issue. Aina states that when she found out the official launch party for the product would be in Laos, Nigeria, she felt “some type of way” and knew she had to make a video about it.²⁹³ She compares the partnership to colonialism and explains that partnering with a mainstream celebrity like Blac Chyna was an intentional move to capitalize on colorism in African countries where skin bleaching is common and more profitable. Aina has been extremely outspoken about skin bleaching on her channel and on social media, even retweeting Whitenicious’s announcement of the collaboration on Twitter with the caption “keep this trash OUT OF NIGERIA.”²⁹⁴ Aina concludes that skin bleaching is only one part of a larger systemic issue of colorism, which affects how darker-skinned people view themselves and how they are treated by others.

By positioning skin bleaching as a global “epidemic,” Aina applies an intersectional transnational approach her video.²⁹⁵ She discusses the complexities of identity by recognizing the cultural norms and attitudes surrounding colorism in African countries like Nigeria that may leave Black Africans more vulnerable to marketing tactics from skin bleaching companies. She also recognizes that skin bleaching products are marketed for all genders, even though beauty products in the US are typically marketed towards women, further challenging notions of who is socially permitted to use beauty products. Furthermore, Aina’s analysis illustrates that beauty

²⁹² Jackie Aina, “We Need To Talk About SKIN BLEACHING... | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, December 1, 2018, video, 16:56, <https://youtu.be/YhxShoelz4>.

²⁹³ Aina, “We Need to Talk About SKIN BLEACHING.”

²⁹⁴ Naira Banks (@jackieaina), 2018, “keep this trash OUT OF NIGERIA,” Twitter, Nov 20, 2018, 8:39 p.m., <https://twitter.com/jackieaina/status/1065072267388903424>.

²⁹⁵ Aina, “We Need to Talk About SKIN BLEACHING.”

standards rooted in colonialism and racism operate on a global scale and continue to present a proximity to whiteness as the ideal. Tracey Owens Patton contends, “African American women have either been the subject of erasure in the various mediated forms or their beauty has been wrought with racist stereotypes.”²⁹⁶ In fashion and beauty advertising, when black women are depicted, it is common to see their facial features photoshopped or their skin lightened to mimic hegemonic white beauty standards. This creates the impression that Black women must alter their appearances to appear more beautiful and be deemed socially acceptable. Again, Aina’s audience can see how her rightful motivations to uplift people of color and elicit social change are tightly bound together to present one cohesive persona. Aina speaks directly to those who have or are considering skin bleaching and asks, “At what expense are you willing to put your health and your body on the line to fit a standard?” Aina restates her motivations for becoming a beauty vlogger: to help darker-skinned women feel confident and to “[uplift] people of color,” further supporting her authentic image.²⁹⁷ Through reaffirming her motivations and connecting them to her passions for social change, Aina never appears preachy, but takes on the role of the Auntie who is genuinely concerned for her audience’s health and safety.

While much of Aina’s content is heavily edited and produced, there are still opportunities for her to build trust and strengthen affective bonds with her audience. As I discussed in the previous chapter, intimacy is more easily facilitated through vlogs, yet Aina’s beauty and lifestyle content videos also allow her to create and capture moments of vulnerability on camera.²⁹⁸ Many of Aina’s videos follow the “Get Ready With Me” (GRWM) format in which Aina invites her audience to sit with her and “chit-chat” while she gets ready. Chatting is coded

²⁹⁶ Patton.

²⁹⁷ Aina, “We Need to Talk About SKIN BLEACHING.”

²⁹⁸ Berryman and Kavka, 310-312.

as a feminized form of communication that fosters intimacy and relatability.²⁹⁹ Aina also includes her audience by referring to her videos as “Get Ready with *Us* (emphasis added).” By setting the video up as a conversation, Aina actively invites her audience into her space to engage in discussions about important topics. Most of Aina’s videos, including those discussed in this section, are filmed in her beauty room, which provides consistency and familiarity. The background of the space is set up to look like a bedroom which creates an intimate and personal setting.³⁰⁰ The close-up filming style, with her face in the center of the frame, adds to the feeling of intimacy. Aina also starts most of her videos bare-faced, with natural hair or without a wig. Showing her skin before makeup and her hair unstyled evokes a sense of vulnerability.³⁰¹ Despite being constantly harassed about her skin, Aina does not use heavy filters on her videos. Showing her audience the texture and hyperpigmentation of her skin further illustrates Aina’s trustworthiness. Aina trusts herself to be vulnerable with her audience and trusts her audience to accept her. These displays of vulnerability build trust between Aina and her subscribers. Aina’s approachability makes it possible for her to create a successful online persona, but she is also able to use her platform to raise awareness of problems affecting the Black community in a way that resonates with people of color and is informative to those who are unfamiliar with concepts like colorblindness or colorism. Aina asserts that “It’s always dark-girl hour” on her channel and that she will continue use her platform to advocate for Black women.”³⁰²

Conclusion

²⁹⁹ Duffy and Pruchniewska, 852.

³⁰⁰ Berryman and Kavka, 312.

³⁰¹ Berryman and Kavka, 313.

³⁰² Jackie Aina, “Are Your Dating Preferences Colorist or Racist? Let's Chat! | Jackie Aina,” YouTube, September 3, 2019, video. 22:47, https://youtu.be/tmIypQeF_N4.

danah boyd makes the important assertion that networked publics are not just imagined communities or virtual spaces, but that they affect real world publics and “how people negotiate them.”³⁰³ This chapter illuminates that online spaces can function as “both/and,” serving as spaces where Black women experience violence and harassment, while also being spaces of beloved community that allow for renegotiations of identity for Black women. This chapter has focused on Black women in digital spaces and both the risks and benefits of hypervisibility, illuminating the uncompensated labor that Black women engage in when navigating racism and harassment online. Aina’s hypervisibility online leaves her vulnerable to harassment and unsolicited comments that are further compounded by her racial and gender identities. The violence Black vloggers like Aina experience illustrates the intersections between racialized and feminized digital labor. Yet, this chapter has also shown how Aina navigates these risks while staying true to her personal brand: being authentic, trustworthy, and committed to uplifting people of color and advocating for Black women. Assuming the role of the Auntie, Aina guides the Jackie Aina Family through discussions of complex issues like racism, colorism, and colorblindness, while maintaining an open and supportive space on her channel.

Aina is aware of her unique position as a Black woman in the beauty industry and uses her channel as a platform to talk about her experiences. She is not just a vlogger or celebrity, but also an activist, reshaping beauty narratives and using her platform to call out institutions that continue to render people of color invisible. As a dark-skinned Black woman, Aina understands that visibility can create a ripple effect and change the way that someone perceives themselves, even through “something as simple as having a makeup channel.”³⁰⁴ Aina understands the

³⁰³ danah boyd, “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications,” in *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 45–46.

³⁰⁴ Aina, “Are Your Dating Preferences Colorist or Racist?”

importance and power of her position as a dark-skinned Black woman in the media, commenting that “representation freakin’ matters.”³⁰⁵ Patton explains that content like Aina’s can cause a “counter-hegemonic turn,” in which influential figures can redefine which beauty standards are considered “good” by celebrating their own features “rather than looking for outside acceptance.”³⁰⁶ By redefining cultural beauty ideals from within, Aina is a part of a revolution, challenging white normative beauty standards by unapologetically embracing her Blackness and encouraging her audience to do the same.³⁰⁷ Both Aina’s authentic, trustworthy, persona and her commitment to social justice are cornerstones of her branded identity and are the key reason for Aina’s continued success and ever-growing audience-base.

³⁰⁵ Aina, “Are Your Dating Preferences Colorist or Racist?”

³⁰⁶ Patton, 41.

³⁰⁷ Patton, 44.

CHAPTER 4: “PULL UP OR SHUT UP:” BLACK VLOGGERS AND ACTIVISM ONLINE

In an interview with *InStyle* magazine, Aina breaks down what goes into being a vlogger and outlines the many roles she performs: accountant, lawyer, producer, social media manager, and even “lighting tech person.”³⁰⁸ Aina recognizes the time and labor that being a vlogger entails, explaining that while you must be business-savvy, it is more important to be yourself. She states, “You have to be good at packaging it all in a way that people will enjoy.”³⁰⁹ Aina understands that creating a marketable and authentic persona is the true key to success. Despite the hours of labor that Aina performs, she contends that, “Talent really ain’t enough.”³¹⁰ By presenting herself as always passionate about her work and creating an authentic, trustworthy, and ultimately profitable persona, Aina has achieved success and is a notable figure in the online beauty community. Additionally, by offering advice and honest reviews, celebrating Blackness, and allowing her audience an intimate look at her everyday life, Aina’s channel has become a community and the bonds between her and her audience are familial. Her audience affectionately refers to themselves as the “Jackie Aina Family,” with Aina assuming the role as the “Auntie,” a supportive mentor. This thesis offers an analysis of the often uncompensated labor that Black vloggers like Aina engage in by developing a distinct persona and branded identity, building affective communities with their audience, and navigating racism online.

Chapter One outlined my project and provided a literature review. I organized the scholarship into four main themes: (1) lifestyle media, (2) race and racism online, (3) Blackness,

³⁰⁸ Adrienne Farr, “Jackie Aina Doesn’t Think Talent Is Enough When It Comes to Finding Success,” *InStyle*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.instyle.com/beauty/jackie-aina-success-story-interview>.

³⁰⁹ Farr.

³¹⁰ Farr.

representation, and beauty culture, and (4) digital feminized labor. My literature review placed discussions from the fields of intersectional Black feminist and cyberfeminist theory, critical media studies, and internet/digital media studies in conversation with one another. I engaged with scholars like Simone Browne and Janell Hobson to acknowledge how colonialism and American slavery have shaped contemporary beauty culture and the complexities of race and self-branding, as well as Andre Brock and Safiya Umoja Noble, who explore Blackness, community, and algorithmic racism in digital platforms. I also incorporated Minh-Ha T. Pham's research on Asian fashion bloggers and Brooke Erin Duffy's work on blogging and feminized aspirational labor to address the lack of scholarship on the experiences of Black women in digital feminized creative industries like vlogging. This literature review helped me establish through-lines between the scholarship and set the stage for my intersectional analysis of Black women's uncompensated labor in digital spaces which explores how Black women build affective communities and navigate harassment and hostile online platforms.

Chapter Two discussed how Aina crafted her authentic and trustworthy persona and continues to situate herself as rightfully motivated. These elements of Aina's persona and discourse of passion set up YouTube as a creative outlet, not as a space of labor. Aina adopts three strategies discussed by Duffy and Hund to show that she "has it all." First, using rhetorics of passion to discuss her work, Aina presents herself as a creator that is motivated by passion, not profit. Aina describes her channel as a positive and uplifting space that celebrates difference and seeks to challenge hegemonic beauty standards and make people of color feel beautiful.³¹¹ Aina's ethos of centering Black women is at the forefront of everything she does, from her branded partnerships to her luxury candle company, Forvr Mood, and is recognized by her

³¹¹ Aina, "How to Fix Your Social Media Algorithm."

audience as a tenet of her personal brand. Second, Aina uses her channel to showcase her glam lifestyle and “bougie” aesthetic to continue to appear aspirational. While one could argue that flaunting one’s wealth would make one appear less inauthentic, Aina’s audience continues to support her because of her down-to-earth personality and her commitment to showing Black women engaging in self-care to prove that Black women’s pleasure is not indulgent. Third, Aina shares intimate details of her life with her audience through vlogging. Aina films and uploads her most personal moments, like her engagement proposal, to her channel, inviting her audience to share them with her. Aina’s audience is able to see her in more casual and vulnerable environments, which works to strengthen their bond. Aina’s fame and financial success have also positioned her as a celebrity. Yet she continues to be celebrated by her audience for “keeping it real.”³¹² She positions herself as authentic and accessible by appealing to middle-class sensibilities, as well as through gendered acts of self-promotion and building affective relationships with her audience.³¹³ She has situated herself as an Auntie, the backbone of the “Jackie Aina Family,” the term for her community of subscribers.

Chapter Three looked at another key element of Aina’s personal brand: addressing racism in the beauty community. While the majority of Aina’s videos feature beauty and lifestyle content, many of them also discuss social issues like racism, colorism, and post-race colorblind ideology. In this chapter, I argued that navigating racism online is another form of uncompensated labor that Aina must engage in, due to online platforms assuming a white masculinized audience which often leaves marginalized users like Black women more vulnerable to harassment. From dealing with hateful comments to unsolicited remarks about her skin and

³¹² Aina, “Unpopular Opinions: Beauty Guru Edition | Jackie Aina.”

³¹³ Berryman and Kavka, 309.

body, Aina’s hypervisibility places her in a precarious position. It allows her to build an affective community but also requires her to engage in labor that is unique to her experiences as a Black woman. Aina actively uses her channel to subvert dominant images of Blackness, from doing an ASMR video eating fried chicken and reacting to hateful comments to unpacking representations of Black women in rap music videos and discussing how internalized colorism and racism manifest in dating preferences.³¹⁴ By publicly challenging racist assumptions and rumors, Aina solidifies her pro-Black stance, which is a cornerstone of her personal brand. This content is not expected of her – on the surface, it does not seem to relate to beauty or lifestyle content – but further exemplifies the additional labor that Aina must engage in to confront harassment and continuously defend her positionality as a Black woman online.

As I have discussed throughout this project, there is a clear formula for what “makes” a beauty vlogger: authenticity, relatability, intimacy, and the right motivations. Digital content creators must always present themselves as rightfully motivated by balancing realness and profitability; they cannot appear to be driven by money, fame, or status, and must also maintain their authentic personality. Similar to other beauty vloggers, Aina performs feminized acts of relational community-building and appeals to audience values of authenticity and relatability, but she also uses her channel to engage her audience in discussions on larger social issues. Aina refuses to conform to industry or hegemonic beauty standards, subverting the notion of palatable Blackness. Aina also recognizes that her job has given her the opportunity to become financially self-sufficient. Yet she continues to present herself as someone who holds true to her beliefs, prioritizing her morals and ethics above all else. Aina appears rightfully motivated and also

³¹⁴ Aina, “Reacting to HATE COMMENTS ASMR;” Aina, “Are Your Dating Preferences Colorist or Racist?;” Jackie Aina, “We Need To Talk About SKIN BLEACHING.”

motivated “for the culture,” seeking to “break generational curses” of financial insecurity and to be a role-model for her audience.³¹⁵ Viewers understand that Aina would never review a product she didn’t like or take a sponsorship with a problematic company for the sake of money or views. Her ethos of self-love, her openness about her experiences as a Black woman, and her transparency about her journey to success build trust and strengthen her relationship with her audience. She has built her channel from humble beginnings, constructing a community that resembles the familial and, in doing so, is able to maintain her authenticity and uphold her status as “Auntie” for her subscribers. Her audience knows that Auntie Jackie will always have the tea and the best advice.

This project makes a valuable contribution to research on digital feminized labor by addressing the unique experiences of Black beauty and lifestyle vloggers like Aina. Centering Black women’s identities and experiences makes visible the labor that is often hidden by rhetorics of passion. This project also contributes to digital and new media studies by exploring the complexities of being a hypervisible Black woman in digital spaces and looking at how Black women build community online while simultaneously navigating harassment and hostile platforms. Given the scope of this project, Jackie Aina’s content and persona were the sole focus of my thesis. While I was able to provide a glimpse into an underexplored topic, this data is not representative of the experiences of all Black beauty and lifestyle vloggers, especially vloggers with smaller audiences and less access to resources, or vloggers that have additional intersecting identities (like class and sexuality). Black vloggers have the potential to be fruitful sites of analysis for examining feminized labor and the impact of post-race, post-feminist, and neoliberal

³¹⁵ Aina, “UNPOPULAR OPINIONS: Your Fave IG Fashion Brands.”

ideology in digital creative industries and online platforms. I hope that my work continues these conversations and brings Black women's creative and uncompensated labor to the forefront as significant sites worthy of study.

Aina's YouTube channel is a space of social change. Her content celebrates Blackness and subverts the hegemonic white gaze and standards of beauty. By centering her identity and experiences in the content she creates, Aina is engaging in Black cyberfeminism. She melds her racial identity into her online persona which has become a cornerstone of her content. During the summer of 2020 at the height of police violence and anti-racist activism, Aina joined Nigerian entrepreneur Sharon Chuter, owner and founder of the cosmetic brand Uoma beauty and creator of the Pull Up for Change movement.³¹⁶ In an Instagram video with over a million views, Aina expressed her support for Chuter and encouraged her audience/consumers to support Black-owned brands. She also rallied her audience to continue to demand accountability from companies who posted statements of solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement, but had been criticized for their racist practices in the past, thus making their activist efforts appear superficial and performative. According to Eyecue Insights, an AI-powered social media analytics platform created by Carolina Bañales, in the past three years only 13% of images posted to top beauty brands' Instagram feeds featured dark skin tones.³¹⁷ Between May and July 2020, the number of images increased tenfold.³¹⁸ Aina challenges all brands and companies that she has previously worked with to publicly announce their number of Black and POC employees within 72 hours and "pull up," "by actively committing to hire more Black employees at higher

³¹⁶ Chuter started the movement started on Instagram at @pullupforchange.

³¹⁷ Elizabeth Segran, "Beauty Brands Were Quick to Tout Diversity during Summer Protests, but the Commitment Was Short-Lived," *Fast Company*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90569465/beauty-brands-were-quick-to-tout-diversity-during-summer-protests-but-the-commitment-was-short-lived>.

³¹⁸ Segran.

levels of leadership.”³¹⁹ Through participating in the Pull Up for Change movement, Aina is addressing the scaffolding of racism within the beauty industry that occurs in employment and hiring practices, advertising and digital content creation, and product design. A product with limited shades for deeper skin tones, an ad campaign that only features white models, or a tone-deaf social media post are the result of a company’s leadership lacking diversity. Aina contends that she is making this statement because she “cares about the beauty community tremendously” and recognizes the importance of the community to highlight diverse perspectives and encourage self-love. As a Black woman, Aina understands how a lack of representation and lack of availability of inclusive products can impact how one determines their self-worth. By supporting Pull Up for Change, Aina continues her work as an advocate for inclusivity in the beauty community by addressing how the beauty industry is connected to larger oppressive systems.

As I have illustrated throughout this project, the unrecognized labor of Black women has been the catalyst for many a social movement and for social change. I am forever grateful to the labor of Black women, especially Black queer feminists like the Combahee River Collective and Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the founders of Black Lives Matter. As the first to fully address the intersections of identity and present Blackness as complex and multifaceted, Black feminism and cyberfeminism continue to be necessary frameworks for studying how systems of oppression shape the experiences of marginalized communities. Further research should continue the legacy of Black feminists to explore how Black digital content creators are building community and navigating hostile platforms and algorithms. It is important to recognize that Black communities are not monolithic; there is great diversity among the content and the

³¹⁹ Jackie Aina (@jackieaina), 2020, “Pull up or Shut Up!!!” Instagram TV video, June 3, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/tv/CA_pxNoAvRE/?igshid=1h74ubosrfesp.

identities and experiences of Black vloggers. In the era of black squares on Instagram feeds and performative digital activism, feminism and intersectionality have become buzzwords co-opted for capitalist gain and misused by those with the privilege to ignore the ways in which they uphold oppressive systems. I assert that the most important way to understand these nuanced experiences is through the voices of those who hold these identities and experiences firsthand. It is imperative that we continue to center and listen to Black women, credit Black women, and center the work of Black women whenever possible.

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