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This study seeks to explore the beauty community on YouTube and how the audience viewing these videos about beauty products interpret authenticity in the people they watch. While also looking for how authenticity presents itself in the beauty influencers themselves. This study also investigates how race, gender, class, and sexuality plays a role in understanding and viewing what it means to be authentic. A content analysis was performed using two case studies Jackie Aina and Jeffree Star to study the community. Videos and comments posted from January 2019-January 2020 were studied for instances of realness. Findings concluded that authenticity was presented in two different forms: the "everyday girl" and aspirational. Commonalities of the two presentations included: transparency, intimacy/vulnerability, and relatability. Race, gender, class, and sexuality, were found to have some impact on the narratives as it helped audiences feel more intimate and connected to the individual influencer.

EXPLORING AUTHENTICITY IN YOUTUBE'S BEAUTY COMMUNITY

by

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

YouTube and Instagram have elevated the business of self-branding. If you go onto a popular YouTube channel, the content creator will have an intro and outro that is their signature. They welcome the viewer and say goodbye each time one clicks on a video. The content is familiar, and they tend to stick to a certain topic. You may also notice that they are using their personality to sell subscribers a product. Maybe they have just created merchandise of their own and are now encouraging their subscribers to help support them. Each creator creates an image, a personality, and a reliable and intimate look in whichever direction their content goes. It may be a fitness guru, a book lover, or a travel channel. One way or another, these individuals have built a brand around themselves and have made their subscribers socially and financially invested in their lives. This is the effectiveness of the self-brand. Each creator has crafted a self-brand, an identity that allows others to become attached, familiarized, and to become relatable.

The self-brand encourages subscribers and the audience to identify and form connections with the influencer/content creator. In a world where people are expected to be their own brand, social media can catapult people to commercial success and popularity. It also allows people to perform identities online through videos and images. It allows people to be invested socially and become entrepreneurs. These platforms become a way for people to become “social influencers.” This individual acquires millions of subscribers online by creating a brand or a specific type of content on their platform. Social influencers have the power to get subscribers to buy into something. Subscribers may connect with the content creator emotionally and intellectually. They often evaluate these connections using the language of authenticity.

How does a social influencer maintain authenticity? Do social influencers express realness through images, videos, comments, or some other way? Does this authenticity translate across mediums in different ways? Does it have the same effect on consumers? This also leads to the question, if they are branding themselves, and they rely on their audience connecting to their authenticity, how do they sustain authenticity? Es-

pecially, when becoming an influencer can become a career option. How do they stay authentic while selling products or themselves to an audience? Does social media change their approach to authenticity?

In this study, I will be looking at the beauty community on the social media site YouTube. On this platform, content creators review products, conduct makeup tutorials, share tips, hair tutorials, etc (García-Rapp, 2019). Similar products, tutorials, and make-up brands are commonly reviewed, and each channel caters to a specific audience that may overlap with other creators. I will look at two prominent influencers in the beauty community: Jackie Aina and Jeffree Star. Both influencers have created or collaborated on makeup lines and have accumulated millions of followers.

My research identifies two distinct presentations of authenticity: the “everyday girl” and aspirational authenticity. These findings contribute to the literature on the performance of self-branding by exploring how these forms are evident in the performances of realness. By looking at the narratives and messages that Aina and Star share, I am able to see ways in which these influencers develop realness in relation to their audiences. By looking at these dynamics, we are able to gain further insight into a sphere that is heavily commodified due to the consumerist nature of the community.

Authenticity is quite a contradictory thing. People expect others to be “real.” They want a connection with the influencer. However, this connection that people seek can be fabricated but not forced. People cultivate an authentic connection in order to catapult and sustain their brands, earn profits, and to gain social influence over others. This tension of authenticity presents a unique opportunity to discover what exactly people determine to be real. While also discovering in what ways do people present themselves as authentic, and do certain presentations seem more fabricated than others, or are there certain ways of presenting oneself to achieve the language of authenticity in the digital age?

Many people sell and market an image of themselves online. Some, however, just do it for profit. I think this is interesting because we see this so often that it is important to understand what goes beneath self-branding. As technologies and platforms rise and fall one might wonder, does self-branding change, adapt, or stay the same when we market ourselves on different platforms? The situation is this: social influencers are now a dream job for Generation Z and Millennials. But, to get this level of recognition and success, to make this a career, these individuals need to have a brand. They need to have an angle. They need to have something that makes them stand out. Authenticity becomes a tool in which influencers use to enhance their brands.

## CHAPTER II: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### ***A Consumer Culture***

Consumer societies create the conditions for self-branding. Fieldman states that we live in a world where “everything is for sale” (Hochschild, 2011, p. 22). In such a society, people find meaning using commodities. Consumer societies rely on mass production and capitalist practices for everyday life (Sassatelli, 2017). Lury (2011) believes consumer cultures are a form of material culture, as it is through material goods, “it is in acquiring, using, and exchanging things that individuals come to have social lives” (p.14). In consumer culture, people form identities around their role as consumers. People find meaning in the objects they own, attach identities on the object, and communicate with one another through the possessions one owns and displays (Lury, 2011). In fact, “people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home...social control is anchored in the new needs which [the consumer] has produced” (Lury, 2011, p. 61; Marcuse, 1968, p. 24). Since identity is tied to consumption, identity then becomes a marketing tool. By focusing on the individual and empowering others, or using the message ‘you can,’ marketers fostered an actual relationship with consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Social media influencers are relatively new participants in and contributors to consumer culture.

Within this society, the definition of work also changes. Du Gay and Flemming state that work has “...shift[ed] to constructing work as a space of authenticity and incorporation of extra-organizational identity” (Yeritsian, 2018, p.705). This includes the “just be yourself” management that encourages workers to buy into the new capitalism and encourage others when working (Yeritsian, 2018). Workers are encouraged to put themselves into the work that they are making and incorporate their own identities into the workplace (Yeritsian, 2018). Others such as Kellner and Kallberg, state that the other term for the new spirit of capitalism is techno-capitalism (Yeritsian, 2018). The definition of labor has also changed with this web-based wave of capitalism, with labor now being referred to as a community effort (Yeritsian, 2018). As capitalism changed, society we are seeing the introduction of new forms of work (Du Gay, 1996).

The emergence of digital platforms, too, has shaped forms of labor. Labor can be performed in social factories, which suggests that production extends from the factories to society itself. This can be seen on digital platforms where people post about their lives, this daily life update becomes a form of capital and accumulation. (Bakioğlu, 2018). Along with a shift in labor in the era of the digital age, digital audience labor allows for consumers to find meaning out of the media they are consuming (Nixon, 2016). This helps facilitate convergence, which is when the producer and consumer interact. More specifically, it is when consumers and producers co-create new products or franchises (Bakioğlu, 2018). For example, social influencers use social media sites to poll from their audiences the kinds of content they provide, which gives the chance for the influencer to learn from the audience, and provides opportunities for subscribers to contribute to the influencers channel. Convergence then affects the ways in which audiences interact with other individuals based on the platform they are on and creates a new form of work and meaning surrounding commodities and the self.

### ***Advertising in Social Media***

In contemporary consumer culture, new forms of advertising and marketing take hold (Lury, 2011). As marketing trends transformed over the years, native advertising grew to prominence online, especially with Instagram and Facebook (Kim et al., 2017). Native advertising is when someone promotes a product or service in the style of their own content without sharing that it was a promotion, and that they were being paid to do so by a company (Wojdyski & Golan, 2016). Native advertising is expected to generate about \$36 billion in profit by 2021 (Kim et al., 2017). As marketers look to increase profits, they hire social influencers and celebrities to advertise their products (Kim et al., 2017). These forms of native advertising can range from content including: posts, articles, and videos that are sponsored by companies (Wojdyski & Golan, 2016).

Another prominent form of advertisement and revenue for beauty gurus are product placements. Product placements are “the purposeful incorporation of a brand into non-commercial settings” (Williams et.al., 2011, p. 2). When requested by an advertiser, the content creator has free rein on how they present the product (Gerhards, 2017). Prod-

uct placement is present in online social media websites, especially on YouTube and Instagram. On YouTube, social influencers are sent products for free to review or they are paid money to promote the product. YouTubers can also request to be sent items for review online as well (Gerhards, 2017).

### ***Self-Branding***

Predictably, branding practices have shifted along with advertising and marketing. Where advertisers once focused on the products themselves, they began to focus on the consumers, transitioning from a production to an emotional marketing approach (Whitmer, 2018). Brands now focus less on the products that are being made and more at the relationships with the consumer and the values the company exudes. Businesses, employees, and consumers alike are encouraged to 'live the brand.' Brands also create a social life around the brand to encourage consumers to find meaning and community within the product/brand (Lury, 2011). In a society where everything is commodified, branding then extends to the self. Commodification is the production and exchange of products that are treated as commodities (Sassatelli, 2007).

The personal brand or self-brand is when someone markets themselves as a commodity (Chen, 2013). This self-branding practice is popular with "creatives and professionals" (Whitmer, 2018, p.2). With the increase in influence of brands, some argue that we are now living in a brand culture, in which "cultural meanings are organized by economic exchange" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.7). Self-branding has become a way in which we express ourselves and the messages and images we want to sell. People begin to brand who they are, broadcasting their 'core me,' and then produce and sell themselves (Banet-Weiser 2012). Self-branding, or as Wernick (1991) states, the branded self, consists of a "persona produced for public consumption" (p.192). This definition of self-branding is relevant in the digital age, especially on YouTube where influencers must create a branded image of themselves in order to market oneself online.

An important aspect of self-branding is authenticity. Many researchers have begun to study the very meaning of being authentic. Trilling (1972), seems to suggest that what is perceived to be authentic "...exists wholly by the laws of its own being" (p.93). Self-

branding has also been understood as “calculated authenticity” which combines Trilling’s definition and the manipulation of authenticity to capitalize a specific market or audience for profit, as authenticity is crucial to a sustained self-brand (Whitmer, 2019). Calculated authenticity thus is a contradiction in terms. Whitmer seems to suggest that calculated authenticity is then used for a purpose outside of “...its own being,” be that for monetary gain or for social influence (Trilling, 1972, p.93).

According to Banet-Weiser (2012), “...building a brand is about building an authentic relationship with a consumer, one based...on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations” (p.8). It is also essential to being a social influencer and maintaining a following with one’s audience (Khamis et al., 2017). As authenticity depends on people letting others see their “inner selves” (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that brand marketing has moved further from just creating a relationship with the consumer, it is now “...about niches and authenticity...” (p.38).

Focusing on the rise to success and maintaining credibility in lifestyle gurus on Instagram, Baker and Rojek (2020) argue that social influencers and social media change the definition of authenticity. Instead of arguing that authenticity is being true to oneself, they argue that authenticity is partially a performance and that:

on social media authenticity is a form of social capital designed to establish affective relations of trust and intimacy with followers. It is not about revealing one’s \ true self, but about appearing believable to others by presenting a compelling persona, narrative, and performance. Authenticity is performed online by disclosing details about their private lives (p.76).

This approach to authenticity as performances that disclose private lives aligns with previous accounts of calculated authenticity. It is relevant to social media because it captures how online dynamics factor into authenticity. Baker and Rojeck’s (2020) focus on authenticity in social media is also crucial, because I am looking at how authenticity is presented on social media in the beauty community. As, different platforms and communities invite different audiences and ways in which to present oneself online (Baker and Rojek, 2020).

## ***Social Media: Networked Publics and Media Affordances***

Social media is important to self-branding. In fact, “on social websites such as YouTube and Instagram it is now entirely commonplace for individuals to monetize themselves by working to develop legions of followers or subscribers--no need for television networks or other cultural intermediaries” (Hearn, 2017, p.67). In order to fully look at how self-branding is presented online, one must first understand how social media blurs the lines, creates communities, and changes how people make use of the internet (boyd, 2014).

danah boyd states that social media consists of “the sites and services that emerged during the early 2000s, including social network sites, video sharing sites, blogging and microblogging platforms, and related tools that allow participants to create and share their own content...social media also hints at a cultural mindset...Web 2.0 ” (p.6). With the rise in social media accessibility, the lines between public and private spheres have become blurred. People are no longer confined to their private homes to access the internet or to watch or view social media videos or posts (boyd, 2014; Raine & Wellman, 2012). Now, people are able to connect and view their favorite social influencers at any time, place, or space.

The blurring of the lines has also led to the emergence of networked publics. Networked publics, “are publics that are restructured by networked technologies... they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (boyd, 2014, p.8). Essentially, they provide a space for people to come together and provides a community for those who enter the space (boyd, 2014). These networked publics also stand as another form of producer/consumer (Baker and Rojek, 2020).

Networked publics also have affordances that help shape spaces. Affordances are “...the particular properties or characteristics of an environment can... make possible...certain types of practices, even if they do not determine what practices will unfold” (boyd, 2014, p.10). Social media allows for certain behaviors and practices to

occur online. This can be seen through interactions between content creators and fans that can occur at any time via comment sections or direct messaging. Social media is also visible to others, which promotes an opportunity for interaction. It allows for the private to become public online. This can be seen through fans sharing personal stories to relate to the content creator, to the content creator sharing private moments online. It also is spreadable, which can help people share news in their community, videos they find funny, etc. (boyd, 2014). This can fuel drama in the community as everyone tries to stay connected and informed about what is occurring in their digital social sphere. Networked publics are also easily searchable (boyd, 2014). This allows people to search for individuals or topics of interest to them and form connections with content creators and fellow fans. Being able to search for these communities online, makes it easier to find spaces within the community that they believe they most fit.

## CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

The internet created the conditions for the rise of self-branding online, where authenticity is needed in order to stand out (Khamis et al., 2017). What it means to be authentic on social media varies (Baker & Rojek, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a; Marwick, 2013; Tolson 2010). The presentation of the self changes based on the values of the community, as well as the "...cultural and economic context" on YouTube (Banet-Weser, 2012, p.66). Prior research done on online cultures, self-branding, and authenticity in the beauty community shows us the communicative practices that allow others to perceive authenticity, the role of intimacy, norms/values in the community, and how video formatting can promote realness (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Tolson, 2010; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberbes 2017, 2018). Other research addresses gender roles in a female-dominated space, the language used to connect with audiences, and how one is expected to act in the community. Further research must be done to gain a better understanding on how men present themselves in a female space, and define types of authenticity that emerge from the self-presentation in the community, as the prior research that exists only gives specific traits one must need to be successful online (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Tolson, 2010; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberbes 2017, 2018).

### ***The Year of 'You': The Age of Web 2.0***

The beauty community emerged in the age of Web 2.0 as people formed communities around makeup (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). For various reasons, self-branding thrives in such circumstances. As, people on social media can present themselves and form identities online by using the digital tools social media provides (Marwick, 2013). Web 2.0 allows for one to create a self-brand and foster relations online (Baker & Rojek, 2020; Marwick, 2013).

As the internet has advanced technologically, the purposes and characteristics of the web has shifted over time. The characteristics of the internet has become known as

Web 2.0. More specifically, "...Web 2.0... is characterized by the rise of user-generated content, usability (ease of use by non-experts) and the growth of social media" (Baker & Rojeck, 2020, p. 47). This has allowed the rise of social media networks and websites like YouTube, allowing for more participation and interaction on the internet than ever before (Marwick, 2013).

In 2006, *Time Magazine's* person of the year was "you," echoing the ideals of Web 2.0, and the rise of user-generated content that still dominates today (Baker & Rojek, 2020). Grossman (2006) proclaims:

But look at 2006 through a different lens and you'll see another story...It's a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes....The tool that makes this possible is the World Wide Web...It's a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter. Silicon Valley consultants call it Web 2.0, as if it were a new version of some old software. But it's really a revolution.

Grossman (2006) suggests that Web 2.0 has allowed us to connect with others in a way we have never before and it has shifted the way we communicate with others due to the various platforms on the internet. Web 2.0 and the emphasis of 'you' has also been prevalent on the social media website YouTube, whose own slogan was once 'broadcast yourself' (YouTube). With this emphasis, communities began to emerge on the internet focusing on different topics. They occur as, Web 2.0 technologies and the Internet have allowed for people to "... foster meaning, identity and a sense of belonging" online (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p.2).

One such group is the beauty community on YouTube, which is defined as a community of people who share their love of makeup, hair products, nail/skin, and other beauty-themed products and topics. With 1.7 billion videos on this topic, there is a large community online who have come together using Web 2.0 tools to create an intimate and

educational space online (García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). The community is rife with commodification, and followers are constantly being hounded with advertisements for makeup products to use in order to look like the influencer. Prior research has indicated that social influencers use self-branding in order to stand out and to hold influence in the community (Baker & Rojek, 2020; Kim et al., 2017; Marwick, 2013). These influencers navigate a commodified sphere as they attempt to project realness to their audiences, to foster and sustain their self-brands. As we continue to know more about authenticity in the beauty community, we may be able to understand why these social influencers stand out in the community.

### ***The Rise of Social Influencers***

Micro-celebrities and social influencers create self-brands through social media to be recognized (Khamis et al., 2017). The audience creates images of authenticity, intimacy, and relatability in order to connect with the influencer (Baker & Rojek, 2020; boyd, 2014; Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2013; Morris & Anderson, 2015). By crafting these narratives they are able to cultivate an audience and sustain their brands in an oversaturated market.

Micro-celebrities, which was coined by Senft, is described as “the concerted and strategic cultivation of an audience through social media with a view to attaining celebrity status” (boyd, 2014; Khamis et al., 2017, p. 196; Senft, 2008). Micro-celebrities often encounter similar experiences that celebrities have and can be objectified like them as well. Micro-celebrities become well known in niche areas and experience the trappings of “normal” society (boyd, 2014). They hold attention, heighten their status by posting content that is associated with their brand, and cultivate a following with their fans. Once a person has achieved this status, it then becomes “... a self-presentation strategy that includes creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself, constructing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and identifying them as fans, and strategically revealing information to increase or maintain this audience” (Marwick, 2013, p.117).

Micro-celebrities appear the way they do as a result of their audiences and the specific nature of social media celebrity (Khamis et al., 2016). Micro-celebrities must then be authentic and sustain their status in order to be relevant and to foster their brand. By projecting the ordinary and utilizing social media to promote themselves, micro-celebrities are able to strengthen and hold onto their brand (Khamis et al., 2017).

When a micro-celebrity utilizes their brand for monetary gain, they may be called a social influencer. A social influencer is someone who "...pursue[s] fame professionally as a vocation. They have been able to self-brand a public persona successfully transforming their online fame into a business" (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 80). Transitioning from one's micro-celebrity status, influencers content then becomes a job, as they can profit off of sponsorships and advertisements (Baker & Rojek, 2020). The literature seems to suggest that the difference between micro-celebrities and social influencers, is that money is involved and, "influencers are a brand." (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 87). Baker and Rojek (2020) state that social influencers in the lifestyle community have transitioned from their micro-celebrity status, by having established their brand, and cultivated an audience, who continuously comes to seek their advice or for anything else they might need. In the lifestyle community on social media, the content of social influencers, "curates the mundane, ordinary aspects of everyday life; their knowledge and advice supported through lived experience rather than professional training" (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 80).

Social influencers still need to maintain an intimate and accessible persona, that they crafted when they were micro-celebrities. The difference is that social influencers must then still appear ordinary and authentic in order to sell the products they advertise (Baker & Rojek, 2020). After all, their marketability hinges on the presentation of an unedited and 'real' persona through the use of intimacy and general expertise. By getting viewers invested into the guru, social influencers are able to effectively market themselves and the products that they show in their content (Baker & Rojek, 2020). Social influencers must appear to be genuine and only support products that they believe in as "relations of managed trust and the perception of authenticity are the basis of their credibility" (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p.88). Prior research seems to suggest that social influencers are shaped by the need to sell products.

On YouTube, social influencers typically followed similar formats in terms of content: a hint of intimacy while focusing on a product or their typical content (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 307). With this intimacy, comes perceived authenticity (Morris & Anderson, 2015). Perceived authenticity is found through what the audience believes to be the gurus “real” self. The authentic self can be found where the creator is filming in their bedroom, could have an intimate discussion with their fans through videos and message boards, and directly chat with their fans/subscribers. Vlogs create an intimate and ‘real’ image of the creator. Prior research has also suggested another path to being seen as authentic. A past study suggests that by relating to audiences and seeming real, vloggers create a connection with fans that can catapult them to celebrity status in a way that traditional media cannot (Morris & Anderson, 2015, p. 1205). These varying accounts of realness have similarities in the fact that they agree vlogs invite intimacy. However, they vary in that one suggests that the influencer is authentically themselves and forming intimate connections, while the other suggests that the influencer creates this realness in order to gain celebrity status. Further research could contribute to these varying different explanations of authenticity.

These studies have identified several possible explanations of what “seeming real” to explain celebrities (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Morris & Anderson, 2015). These different explanations also suggest that it might be helpful for people to pay attention to types of authenticity in order to understand variation in what audiences expect and how influencers build cachet with these audiences. In short, it could help us clarify the role that market segmentation plays in shaping authenticity, for instance.

Social influencers essentially “mimics the relationship that brands have with their media partners, the fundamental difference being that influencers exist outside of the traditional power structure as the content producer and editor of their site” (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 81). They have a personalized marketing strategy and they gain authority by distancing themselves from the brands they advertise, and insist they are independent from them (Baker & Rojek, 2020). The audience seems to have an ambivalent relationship with the influencers and create an intimate enough relationship with them in order to buy into the products being sold to them.

## ***Into the Beauty Community***

Authenticity and self-branding are essentials for the beauty community (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Tolson, 2010). Their content created on YouTube consists of the following: how-to tutorials, personal vlogs, product reviews, Q&As, style, and behind-the-scenes content. This growing subgroup on YouTube is predominantly female and skews to a younger audience (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Members in this community range from the ages of 14-34, and either post content or comments on the produced content. Though topics of fashion, body standards, and brands have been focused on in Instagram, the beauty gurus themselves, have not been observed in-depth (García-Rapp, 2019).

### **Self-Branding, Intimacy, and the Structured Narrative**

Beauty gurus are expected to exhibit specific norms and traits in order to be accepted in the community. García-Rapp's case study on beauty YouTuber Buzbeauty, found that specific personality traits were acceptable for self-presentation: self-motivation, positivity, availability, and accountability (García-Rapp, 2017a; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017). Other traits such as appearing ordinary, humble, and passionate/selflessness were encouraged in the community as well. Mentions of passion, honesty, trustworthiness, spontaneous, and aligning their morals with their content, were also associated with expected norms and values in the beauty community. She also found that an important norm of disclosing commercial opportunities was crucial to maintaining trust. Other norms that were essential to the beauty community in videos included self-promotion by other users in the comment sections of beauty vloggers, product reviews, mimicking celebrity culture, and exuding the idea of hard work and being seen as an expert (García-Rapp, 2017a; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017). The main values of the beauty community on YouTube are: trustworthiness, honesty, openness, and being rightfully motivated (inspire, help, not creating content for money) in order to be perceived as authentic (García-Rapp, 2017a).

Self-branding and authenticity can also be found in the way beauty vloggers communicated with their audiences (Tolson, 2010). Tolson found that sloggers engaged in three

types of communicative practices: presentation, interactivity, and expertise (Tolson, 2010). When looking at UK makeup guru Lauren Luke, Tolson discovered the following characteristics: an informal/colloquial speech pattern, filming with single-shot frame of lens, fostering a conversational tone, an expression of personal feelings, and reiterating to the audience that her videos were being made in “real time.” Tolson’s second communicative practice, interactivity of the performance, was about the interaction between the vlogger (Luke) and Luke’s followers in various forms of response. More specifically, the viewers were able to respond to Lauren Luke’s video appearance with a response video to her or communicate to her in the comments section. Luke interacts with her audience through her self-presentation in her videos. Tolson also mentions that the audience tends to model their language after Luke’s and mimic Luke’s language in the comments section (Tolson, 2010). The third form of communicative practice, expertise, is the instructional aspect of the video. Here Luke deploys a hybrid-form of speech where she switches between the audience and the “professional.” She switches between formal and informal speech to encourage audience engagement as she goes over her tutorial (Tolson, 2010).

The platform the social influencer is on shapes self-branding and authenticity. Social media and YouTube in particular provide the tools for gurus to connect with their audience intimately while also advertising product (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2018). In the beauty community, self-branding not only helps build a financial brand, but it also helps build up their followers and reputation in the community (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2018). Common forms of self-branding processes include: giveaways (fosters participation, generates buzz for the creator), advertising gurus personal makeup or beauty related products at the end of their videos, providing gurus additional social media pages in the description box, asking the viewer to subscribe to their channel, and listing a contact email for business opportunities (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2018). Similar phrases are also used with vloggers, who typically ask the viewer of the video to like or share the video with others (Berryman & Kavka, 2017).

The role of intimacy is crucial in influencers sustaining their social status (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). The literature on intimacy, suggests that by creating intimate spaces,

gendered performances, and behaviors, influencers can then become connected to their audience and establish trust and realness with the viewer (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b; Tolson, 2010). Prior research seems to imply that to be an authentic self-brand, regardless of how one presents themselves, one must intimate some form of intimacy with the viewer. While the literature has explored the role of intimacy, the research that has been done has not fully acknowledged how celebrity-like statuses can hinder or help one's attempt at intimacy and vulnerability. By exploring this we can add on to the literatures on celebrities, social influencers, and digital media.

Intimacy is essential to self-branding, success, and connecting to one's audience (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2019; Khamis et. Al, 2017; Redmond, 2014). Previous research shares that an "intimate" setting that YouTube can provide (i.e. in the bedroom), can cause audiences to connect with the YouTuber and project the image of an "ordinary girl." (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a; Tolson, 2010). By facing the camera, talking directly to the audience, and inviting the audience to hear about personal issues or private details of their lives, YouTubers invite subscribers to interact or feel like they know them on a more intimate level (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Tolson, 2010). While research has looked at how influencers have utilized intimacy and vulnerability with their audience, there has been no research on how intimacy is performed when the influencer attempts to perform the trope and fails.

Research has indicated that vlogs provide and foster intimacy between the vlogger and subscriber (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Tolson, 2010). While make-up-tutorials focus more on instruction, vlogs are where viewers can connect and gain more insight into the lives of the influencers. Vlogs also allow the chance for the influencer to interact with their fans (i.e. Q&A's) (García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Vlogs are also considered to be more intimate, as they are usually filmed in private spaces belonging to the vlogger, and the content itself tends to hone in on the vlogger's personal life, so that the audience can get to know them better (Berryman & Kavka, 2017).

Berryman and Kavka (2017), introduced the role of intimacy when looking at the beauty community, and specifically at Zoe Sugg. Intimacy can be found in the following: “The form of intimacy particular to this context is an aggregate of resonances from at least four registers: the spatial (evoking closeness), the temporal (evoking immediacy), the social (produced by patterns of direct address and self-revelation), and the medial (evinced by small-screen techniques such as cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing rhythms, etc.)” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 310).

Types of intimacy also can depend on the audience and the type of product that is being displayed in videos. This was shown with Sugg, who stresses gender intimacy depending on the context of her videos. For instance, when she includes a male in her videos, she stresses the stereotype that women know more about makeup and use subversive play. When adding in a family member to the channel (like a video with her brother) the guru shows another form of intimacy for the audience to connect to, the sibling relationship (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Prior research done on gendered intimacy in the beauty community has only focused on women (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). By focusing on other genders we may gain insight on the similarities and differences in how intimacy is performed. Research has also only looked at heterosexual couples in the community (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a). By looking at queer couples, we might gain insight on how this may or may not impact one’s authenticity and connection with the audience.

The question of authenticity continues to resurface in the study of self-brands in online cultures, as it is relevant to their explanations of why beauty influencers have staying power (Baker & Rojek, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a; Marwick, 2013; Tolson, 2010). Authenticity in the beauty community plays a tremendous role in a beauty gurus self-brand. It allows for them to be perceived as “real” to their audience, an ‘ordinary expert,’ and helps them sustain a positive social presence on the Internet (García-Rapp, 2017a). The “...authenticity of vlogging...is located in its excessive direct address, in its transparent amateurishness and in the sheer volume and immediateness of ‘controversial’ responses, by comparison with and relative to the restraints of traditional broadcasting” (Tolson, 2010, p. 286).

García-Rapp (2017a) and Marwick (2013) also found that trustworthiness could be established when one believed in the product they were reviewing, and when vloggers disclose if the content, they are providing was a paid advertisement. As the community expects the vlogger to only review or discuss products that they actually enjoy, not because someone paid them to recommend it. This stance on “honest brand engagement” is essential to sustaining the genuineness and authentic perception of the vlogger (Marwick, 2013). While Marwick (2013) and García-Rapp (2017a) explore authenticity in terms of consumerism and posting videos outside of monetary gain, my research found that trustworthiness could be determined outside of money.

The beauty community is a commodified sphere where self-branding and authenticity reign supreme. Prior research has found that the values associated with the community are expected by the audience in order to be seen as legitimate (García-Rapp, 2017a; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017). Furthermore, research has found that intimacy and trustworthiness are needed in order for an influencer to be considered authentic (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a; Marwick, 2013; Tolson, 2010). Influencers are able to perform self-branding and authenticity through communicative practices and vlogging.

### ***Adding to the Existing Literature***

The purpose of my research is to understand authenticity in the beauty community on YouTube. As mentioned earlier, the beauty community is full of capitalistic self-branding practices, and exemplifies consumer culture, where people form meanings and identities around makeup products and creates massive communities to share their love for these products. Beauty gurus can potentially influence those who watch them. With the blurring of the lines of public and private spheres, beauty influencers utilize their self-brands to give their audience glimpses of “realness,” and market themselves to reach a micro-celebrity status in their niche markets. As noted above, little research has been done on the beauty community (García-Rapp, 2019). The beauty community can help to illuminate some of these issues of how one is seen as authentic in a commodified digital sphere.

Studies done on the beauty community have only focused on women (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b,2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes 2017, 2018; Tolson, 2010). By only focusing on one gender, the research that exists, only showcases how women perform intimacy in the sphere. By looking at men and non-binary individuals, the literature can be expanded upon to illuminate how genders outside of the dominating majority present themselves in a feminine sphere. Prior research has also only studies heterosexual individuals in the community (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b,2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes 2017, 2018; Tolson, 2010). There is a gap in the literature of how different sexualities can or does not affect one's self-branding and authenticity in the community.

The literature collected on the beauty community has not explored the failure of authenticity (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b,2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes 2017, 2018; Tolson, 2010). There is a gap in the literature that does not explain how gurus utilize their brands to recover their images, maintain their status, and sustain their followers. Nor has research covered how authenticity prevails or fails during times of controversy. This gap could illuminate further discussions on establishing and maintaining authenticity. The literature has also not covered controversies in the community and how that could impact self-branding (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b,2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes 2017, 2018; Tolson, 2010). By studying controversies, we can learn more about how these scandals affect how self-presentation is perceived, and how audiences forgave or stuck around with the YouTuber if they went against the "typical norms." This can help up further understand the audience-content creator dynamic.

Alongside this, the research that has been conducted has not focused on how different identities affect an influencers content (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b,2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes 2017, 2018; Tolson, 2010). By not exploring different identities, there is not a concrete picture of how one's race, class, gender, and sexuality can impact one's self-branding. Prior research also has barely looked at the relationship between the gurus and their viewers (García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b,2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes 2017, 2018). The decision not to look at the relations be-

tween the audience and the influencer leaves out something important about these issues. It does not address how the audience and the influencer foster intimacy, trust, authenticity with one another. It also leaves a gap in understanding the interactions between fans-fans and fans-content creator.

The methods that have been used primarily to study the beauty community have been through case studies and ethnographic research with a focus on participant observation (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; García-Rapp & Roca-Cu-beres 2017, 2018; Tolson, 2010). Prior studies have not used cross-comparative work and have only focused on one case study. By not cross comparing data, the studies limit themselves to a singular audience. Prior research also hasn't looked to see how different identities in the community can affect authenticity. This leaves a hole in the literature, as there is no comparative work that showcases how different aspects of one's identity and self-branding can affect realness online. Nor, has research compared similarities and differences between different influencers in the same community.

## CHAPTER IV: METHODS

I conducted a content analysis on the following social networking platform, YouTube, to investigate self-branding and authenticity in the beauty community. This platform is important to study as it is rife with people creating brands for themselves. To gather the data I watched 171 YouTube videos and scraped 33,900 comments.

### ***Case Selection***

Authenticity and self-branding are essentials for the Beauty community, as some content creators, or “beauty gurus,” have transitioned to offline and online popularity (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; García-Rapp 2017a, 2017b, 2019; García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes 2017, 2018, Tolson 2010,). As of 2015, there are about 1.7 billion YouTube videos online that are situated around beauty topics such as make-up, hair, and skin (García-Rapp, 2017a). The beauty community is a community of people who share their love of makeup, hair products, nail/skin, and other beauty-themed products and topics. Their content, created on YouTube, consists of the following: how-to tutorials, personal vlogs, product reviews, Q&As, style, and behind-the-scene content. This growing subgroup on YouTube is predominantly female and skews to a younger audience (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Members in this community range from the ages of 14-34, and either post content or comments on the produced content. Though topics of fashion, body standards, and brands have been focused on in Instagram, the beauty gurus themselves, have not been observed in-depth.

The beauty community presents an ideal opportunity to study commodification. Big makeup brands have begun to pair up with larger beauty gurus so that they can promote their products. Major companies offer beauty gurus endorsements, sponsorships, etc. Beauty gurus are even now even partnering up with these bigger makeup companies to make their own product line of makeup, skincare, or other beauty-related merchandise (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). For these reasons, beauty influencers are a great fit for observing self-branding when the very nature of their community delves into the advertising of products and themselves.

To study branding and authenticity in the beauty community, I focus on two beauty influencers: Jackie Aina and Jeffree Star, whose content revolves around makeup. Aina and Star also deviate from the “normal” creator and prior research has looked at white, straight, females who mostly lived outside of the US. The only research that dealt with a woman of color in the beauty community was BubzBeauty who resides in Hong Kong. My case studies focus on people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as nationality and sexuality. Jeffree Star identifies as white, androgynous, and gay. While Jackie Aina identifies as a straight, Nigerian-American black woman. Both also live in the United States. While I will be studying Aina and Star, it is important to note that they are nodes in the infrastructure of the online beauty community. These cases are the hubs for the discussion groups of people involved within the beauty community who post comments on their videos and channels.

Former army veteran Jackie Aina’s channel focuses on beauty-related content such as makeup reviews and tutorials. Aina also identifies as an activist and started up her channel to showcase makeup for people of color. Aina has indicated that others view her as “the authority on diversity in complexion” (Houlis, 2018). Working with and collaborating with brands Too Faced (Born This Way foundation line), Anastasia Beverly Hills, elf cosmetics, Sigma Beauty, and Sephora, she has begun to expand her brand off digital platforms. She also received an activist award from the NAACP for her work on YouTube. Since posting her first YouTube video, on August 13th, 2009, she has amassed 3.23 million subscribers as of November 13th, 2019, and has posted 881 videos with a cumulative of 298,350,534 overall views on her channel (Aina, n.d.). She has also been recognized by mainstream media organizations such as Teen Vogue, Glamour, People, BuzzFeed, Seventeen, and US Weekly (MEDIA, n.d.). Aina has also been caught up in some controversy as well. This can be seen with controversies in naming an eyeshadow color called out for being racist, and being involved in feuds with YouTubers such as Jeffree Star, Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner. Her feuds mainly revolve around how other YouTubers or cosmetics companies are either racist or are not doing enough to provide makeup shades for people of color.

Jeffree Star is considered the more controversial makeup influencer over the two. Star made a racist video on Myspace, while in drag and has been known to make some racial slurs. He also has gotten into a lot of feuds with YouTubers and celebrities alike: Kim Kardashian, the founder of makeup company Too Faced, Kylie Jenner, Kat Von D, Manny Gutierrez, James Charles, Jackie Aina, NikkieTutorials, and many more (Dal-l'Asen, 2019). Star is also known to collaborate with other prominent YouTubers both in and outside of the YouTube community as well for videos. In fact, he has had two docuseries made about his life by YouTuber Shane Dawson, which Star has mentioned helped recover his public image. Besides his controversies, Star is also a businessman, being the CEO for his companies Jeffree Star Cosmetics and a merchandise company Killer Merch (Jung, 2017). As of November 13th, 2019, Starr has 16.5 million subscribers, 359 videos, and 1,974,667,205 overall views on his YouTube channel (Star, n.d.). Star first began posting on YouTube on April, 15th, 2009, but was posting during that time videos surrounding his music career, and did not begin posting makeup videos until November 5th, 2014, which launched the introduction of his makeup company, Jeffree Star Cosmetics to his fans.

Both influencers have a million or more followers on YouTube and have become staple names in the beauty community (i.e. makeup) with their respective audiences. Jackie Aina and Jeffree Star have both created a brand for themselves, have held and navigated controversies and feuds, and achieved mainstream success off the internet with their own personal makeup lines. They have also been scrutinized on their brands and their authenticity. As such, they provide an opportunity to see why subscribers stay and what they find appealing about these influencers.

It is important to note that these particular influencers are atypical and may not represent the common influencer. With both Aina and Star having maintained a self-brand and a large following, they will be good examples for understanding how one presents themselves on YouTube and maintaining authenticity. Aina and Star also present a unique perspective on branding. Star started off on Myspace and gathered a following on said platform before transitioning to YouTube. Aina purely started her career on YouTube.

## ***A Brief History of YouTube***

YouTube has about three billion videos viewed every day as of 2011 (Stage & Anderson, 2012). Ranked third in terms of internet usage, YouTube allows users to create videos, share, comment, and connect with others online (Morris & Anderson, 2015, p.1205). YouTube has become a platform with tremendous influence on the public, especially when 89% of its demographic consists of 18-29 year old's in the United States, and can transform an ordinary user into an internet success (Morris & Anderson, 2015, p.1206). Researcher Harry Jenkins notes that participatory culture is prominent on YouTube and allows convergence for fans and creators. Jenkins argues that with bloggers, the internet has created a collective intelligence, where fans and creators come together online and form a community around something (Harguindéguy & Coller, 2015). What once was a non-commercialized, amateur-video content platform, became a commercialized and professional platform. As companies began to see YouTube as a platform to lure consumers, Content ID, Video ID, and Google AdSense programs were implemented, which both monetized materials, and created an ad-friendly atmosphere on the site (Kim, 2012).

## ***Data Collection***

To study this population, the data collection method that I used was a content analysis. I conducted a content analysis to look at the material being produced on the channels, changes in content when it reached a specific subscriber amount, and how subscribers commented on them. I also observed how they presented or changed their brand, which can reveal efforts to remain authentic. Using two case studies (Jackie Aina and Jeffree Star), I watched 171 YouTube videos and read 33,900 comments to gather my data.

On YouTube, I recorded the following features: videos, thumbnails, descriptions of videos, likes/dislikes, and the comments sections on the videos that were posted. To capture and record this data, I used a web-scraper to pull data which included comments and likes/dislikes for each video. To scrape the data I used Google API with a code to gather data from each video. The code pulled three hundred comments per video, and included the subscriber's username, comment, date of comment, and num-

ber of likes per comment. To my knowledge, I am the first person using Google API to scrape data when researching the beauty community.

In terms of content analysis, I chose to look at Aina and Star's YouTube channels. More specifically, on both platforms I studied the content that they posted from January 2019-January 2020. It was important to chronicle 2019 due to the beauty drama that exploded in the community in 2019, and the 8-hour advertisement for Star's makeup line with Shane Dawson. I included two clips from 2020 due to Star's videos "we broke up" and the apology video, "doing what's right." I felt that by including Star's breakup video with his years long partner Nathan, might provide insight into authenticity and intimacy/vulnerability with his audience. His apology video "doing what's right," also felt needed for this study due to the fact that this video addressed his fans concerns about the beauty drama that occurred in 2019 which involved accusations of James Charles being a sexual predator. Star lost trust with his audience once his involvement in the scandal occurred, and I felt this video might provide some understanding of how one could recover from a failure of authenticity.

On YouTube, Aina posted 68 videos from January-December 2019, and Star posted 50 videos from January 2019-July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Due this large amount of data, instead of analyzing their first year and their latest year worth of content, I watched and viewed previous content in order to get a background context to see how they have grown, which I will mention and compare when conducting this research. I looked at their content from their first years worth of videos regarding makeup and 2019-2020, in order to see the full effects of how they have crafted their self-brand, how they interacted with their audience, and how they dealt with conflicts with their brand (i.e. feuds, controversies, etc.).

Alongside the content itself, I also chronicled the ways in which the content was filmed/ the transition to the creators' more professional looking content, and if that correlated with the type of image they were presenting to the audience. I also observed how Star and Aina acted in makeup review videos compared to vlogs or collaborations.

To gather the data, I watched Jackie Aina's first years worth of content on YouTube, consisting of 46 videos, and her content spanning from January 2019 to December

2019, which had 66 videos. The total amount of videos I watched for Jackie Aina was 112. For Jackie Aina's videos I watched her first year's worth of content to get a sense of her brand/authenticity, and to see how she presented herself in the future, where she had gained mainstream success, to see if she had changed. I then transcribed the first 8 videos and began to time stamp and transcribe moments in which I thought she displayed realness and self branding. Jeffree Star's YouTube channel originally started off to promote his music career. I chose to watch his first year of his makeup videos, consisting of 9 videos to once more gain his "original" branding/authenticity. I then watched 50 videos spanning from January 2019-December 2019 and one video on January 11th, 2020 and July 18th, 2020. The total number of videos I watched Jeffree Star was 59 videos. As I reviewed the videos, I noted instances in which Star showcased realness and self-branding and time-stamped them. When time-stamping these moments, I would replay the video and transcribe the phrases Aina and Star would say or record the unspoken moments of authenticity. At the end of all the data collected, I then reviewed the timestamps to capture what authenticity presented itself to be in Aina and Star's videos. I looked for common themes and receptiveness of concepts/markers in their content to determine how authenticity was presented in their videos.

Aina and Star's comments sections were scraped for each video posted in the year 2019 and the two videos in 2020 for Star using Google API and transferred into Google sheets. I scraped 19,500 comments for Aina and 14,400 comments for Star. I read every comment for each video and coded the majority of the comments. The codes were the same for the comments as the videos. However, when reading the comments, I did not search for those code words specifically but they emerged from the comments section. The themes I found were based on how the comments were presented. I inferred each comment and coded based on what the commenter was presenting to the audience and Star and Aina. For instance, commenter Kim Doughman (2020) writes, "Love your candid honesty!..." From this comment I was able to code it as honest/transparent. This is one instance for how I coded my comments. It is important to note, unless otherwise mentioned, that all comments presented in the findings of this study were typical of trends in Aina and Star's replies.

When analyzing the data for the YouTube videos, I searched/listened for words associated with “realness,” “honesty”, “transparency” and “authenticity.” I also coded if there were references to expertise, intimacy/vulnerability, sharing/relating, race, sexuality, class, and gender. I predetermined these factors that I was looking for based on the markers for the norms/values in the community and based on the definitions of authenticity to gauge levels of authenticity. I cross-referenced the audience comments with my notes from watching the videos, as mentioned above.

Observations on the locations of videos, fan interactions, and consumerism were also made through both the comments and videos themselves. I also noted monetization. By allowing ads to play on the videos to see if more intimate vlog-style or apology videos were monetized to further question or confirm authenticity.

Regarding confidentiality, since social media is considered public data, I do not have to worry as much in terms of identifiers. Especially, when looking at the interactions between the creator and the respondents and observing the public videos and images the creator has posted online. This study does include validity and bias risks. I do actively watch both of their channels, which may lead to some bias on my part.

## CHAPTER V: RESULTS

When reviewing the video content and comments associated with Jackie Aina and Jeffrey Star, it became apparent that there were two very different presentations of authenticity. The two forms of authenticity that began to present themselves were “everyday girl” authenticity and “aspirational” authenticity.

“Everyday girl” authenticity is the presentation of being an ordinary girl. This individual is relatable and she is like your best friend.<sup>1</sup> What matters to you, matters to her. The “everyday girl,” while having a “just like you” persona, also holds some form of authority or expertise that separates them from the masses. They manage to merge professional power/experience or techniques and technical terms with being a “regular” person. They project realness through the image of a friend and an educator.

Aspirational authenticity, in my research, is in its very nature contradictory. It is the conflicted desire to be relatable. To find instances in their daily lives that they can relate to others. While also wanting to be the object of one’s desire. Which creates the conditions for the individual to distinguish oneself from their followers, creating a distance between them.

“Everyday girl” authenticity and aspirational authenticity matter because they indicate that in the beauty community, there is more than just one way to communicate realness to their fans. While García-Rapp (2017a) indicates that one must be inspiring, helpful, and in it for the right reasons, in order to be authentic in the beauty community, my research suggests that there is more to being authentic than just having a few traits. My research suggests that an influencer must select a role to perform, that happens to exude realness. This suggests that there may be even more ways to project oneself as real in this community.

Following Baker and Rojek’s (2020), definition of authenticity, my research adds onto the idea that authenticity is a performance. Authenticity is not just about sharing one’s

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<sup>1</sup> I use the world girl tentatively. As, the beauty community, is heavily gendered, this is seen as typical. Further research studying gender in the community is needed to see if the “everyday girl” authenticity applies to other genders as well.

private life online. It's also about portraying a specific blueprint, on top of a specific narrative, in order to instigate trust and relatability with the audience.

These forms of authenticity ("everyday girl" and aspirational) reveal to us two forms in which influencers can stand out in the community, while also ways to connect with the audience. By taking into account possible differences in authenticity, we can begin to understand how self-branding unfolds in digital spheres. These forms of authenticity also show us how one can integrate one's influencer status online. The "everyday girl" manages to hide or minimize her status, while the "aspirational" authenticity model highlights that celebrity-like status to differentiate themselves from the viewer. These presentations may affect whether the audience perceives them to be relatable. These two forms also navigate the consumerist community in two distinct ways. The "everyday girl" may appear humble, may acknowledge the class differences, and find some way to relate to the audience to accommodate them. In contrast, the aspirational influencer will project a consumerist image, which allows for the viewer to live through them, or aspire to be them, in order to get those products. In the following pages, I will illustrate how Jackie Aina and Jeffree Star presented their authenticity online and how they portrayed the "everyday girl" and aspirational authenticity to their audiences.

### ***Jackie Aina***

Jackie Aina's videos themes showed the traditional types of authenticity that were common in Baker and Rojek's (2020) lifestyle gurus and García-Rapp's (2019) beauty guru Buzbeauty. Aina presents herself as the "everyday girl." Aina projected the image of a friendly, down to earth girl, who just happened to know how to expertly apply makeup. Aina downplays her influencer status in order to be seen as relatable.

One way in which both the audience and Aina projected and viewed authenticity was through transparency. Notions of honesty were highlighted as an important aspect of the community. The audience liked that Aina was honest with them about why she used sponsorships, her "100% real" opinions on the products, and her genuine truthfulness about life, being an influencer, makeup, and being a part of the beauty community. Aina stressed in every video through both the captions of her videos and her introductions of

the products that these were her own thoughts on the products. In fact, in the caption section of Aina's videos (2019a) she writes:

\*Some affiliate links are used, which means I may receive a commission should you decide to click that link and make a purchase. My content is 100% not influenced by brands, PR products received, usage of affiliate links, or brand partnerships

Aina made it clear that she solely used these sponsorships in order to keep her channel running, to sustain her career/continue, and to maintain her platform and her place in the community. Statements such as, "Shoutout to Fenty for keeping the lights, the equipment that I have going guys. These wigs, do you think they're cheap? No!" (Aina, 2019a); "Shoutout to NARS for this new wig and paying my car insurance on time" (Aina, 2019c), were made to indicate how the money she made from her sponsorships were used. By appealing to her audience by stating how these sponsorships sustained her lifestyle, she allowed for her audience to relate to her, in the fact that this is also a way for Aina to make an income and pay her bills.

Aina's content does involve sponsorships, product placements, and advertisements. As stated earlier, Aina is transparent to her audience about the business deals she makes in order to sustain her channel and influencer lifestyle. In her video, "SPONSORSHIPS I'd NEVER DO!!!—Jackie Aina," (2019e) she addresses her requirements for accepting brand deals. She states

I think its safe to say I'm the sponsorship queen. People would be surprised to see that I turn down a lot of sponsorship...The one thing I won't do, is when a brand tries to get me to promote a product that I don't like. I've had some brands try it. I'll get 90 percent of the roast if I do that. Its not worth it...when you come to me I have a duty to be honest to my subscribers...

Aina establishes with her fans that she will uphold the social influencer expectation of only supporting products she believes in while also seeking to preserve credibility with the community. In this vein, she will even admit to a bias. Aina mentions that "there are some people who think I'm partial or biased towards a brand. It's true. You'll be a little biased. But I won't sit in front of you and lie" (Aina, 2019b). By disclosing her biases, she reinforces trust with her audience.

In her videos, Aina often used phrases such as “honest,” “real,” “in my own opinion,” “I can 100% say,” etc. which portrayed realness to her audience. Her audience also used the same rhetoric, sharing typical responses of “Love you! Thanks for your honesty as always!!” (Natea Williams, 2019), or, “I’m so obsessed with your unpopular opinions 🥰❤️ speak your truth sis...” (Sipho Auberey Koltana, 2020), and “I wanna be her level of not giving a f\*\*\* and just saying what she thinks” (Lulu Chanel !, 2020). Viewers sometimes commented that she risks being honest even if it could harm her career. This can be seen in comments like Melissa coviello (2019), “it’s awesome that you choose morals and values over money. I appreciate that you’re willing to speak out, to take an actual risk to maybe effect some change...” Aina speaks out about products and brands even when she has professional relationships with them. She acknowledges her position in the community and what she risks by telling the truth, or speaking negatively about something. Or, to the extent that the audience accepts it. As Aina shared, “I put my career on the line when I say these things. I know these people, I interact with these brands.” (Aina, 2019g). User Jonathan & Ora’s comment in response to this video were common: “thank you so much for the honesty even at your own expense. I truly appreciate your reviews, not only as a woman of color, but as a consumer...” (Jonathan & Orael, 2020) were common. This suggests that this transparency was part of Aina’s sense of authenticity.

Aina’s transparency is also found through her conversations regarding being black in the community. In the caption of every single video, she writes, “changing the standard of beauty, one tutorial at a time” (Aina, 2019a). Aina showcases looks for women of color. As one subscriber writes, “...thank you for being...u apologetically black...” (Gretchen O; 2019). Aina discloses transparency on what it means to be black in the beauty community/industry. While also expressing her frustrations at the limiting makeup options women of color have when it comes to makeup shades. She mentions, through an unintended cosmetic pun, that she brings up race “because it applies” (Aina, 2019f). For Aina, race is intrinsically tied to her brand.

Audience members like bek c (2019) write:

I love this. I love how open you are about this race issues in the beauty community. Its interesting and eye opening to hear you talk about problems in the industry that most gurus tip toe around...

Others share similar statements, noting that she is “courageous” or “fearless” when sharing her experiences of being black. Fans seem to support and encourage Aina for educating them on the realities of the industry, calling out brands and people, and for being a source of inspiration to others.

Notions of relatability was also associated with being seen as “real” in the beauty community. In order to find these moments of sameness, fans write out things that they have in common with Jackie, be it using the same makeup or eating the same foods. Commenters wrote, “auntie Jackie just showed us influencers do exactly what us ‘regular people do when we aren’t feeling it lmao” (Bbydollkash,2019), and “...you remind me of a homegirl that I can talk to all day on the phone at work..” (TrillShantel, 2019). Others found Jackie’s mannerisms, her humor, and her relationship, etc. to be relatable for themselves as well. By identifying and sharing what they have in common, the audience buys into Aina’s self-brand.

Aina allowed herself to become relatable, and thus “real” to her audience, by acknowledging social class. Class, in the purpose of this study can be considered ones social status. She mentions that she takes into consideration the products she uses on her channel. Aina also acknowledges her audiences budgets, so that she’s not advertising products that they can’t afford (Aina, 2019d). This shows that she wants her channel to feel approachable to the audience.

Commenters relate to Aina’s class based approach and how she is considerate about monetary limitations. People often write things like, “I appreciate how you talk about small budgets” (silverfish2341, 2020) and “thank you for doing this review especially for chicks like me who have not got that tax refund check yet and have to budget on them cosmetic products! (AsiaJLovely, 2019). While the majority of her audience find her budget-friendly, others feel as if some of the products she sponsors are too expensive. This can be seen in comments such as, “Her makeup is way to expensive!”(nikki pablo, 2019). However even these critics seem to be happy she has gotten the sponsorships

to promote the product, and support her regardless. They support her even if they can't always afford the products that she highlights on her channel.

Aina also showcased relatability through her own makeup palette she released in 2019, which was the Jackie Aina x Anastasia Beverly Hills eye shadow palette. Utilizing the “everyday girl” role, Aina downplayed her business endeavor when promoting her product. She shares her excitement for the pallet, and how much work she put into it, but does not pressure her audience to buy the product. By displaying a used copy of her palette, Aina goes out of her way to show that she actually uses the product. This Insinuates to the audience that she did not create this pallet just for profit.

Members of the beauty community who follow Aina seem to associate intimacy and vulnerability with authenticity. Aina drops intimate and vulnerable moments throughout her videos. This can be seen through including unedited moments in her videos, such as plucking chin hairs and her eyebrows on camera, messing up her makeup and redoing it on the screen, letting her audience come along with her to get facials, and getting laser surgery. She also allowed herself to be vulnerable on camera by discussing what it felt like to black in the community, not feeling like she fit in, and disclosing incidents of racism she encountered while in the community. Aina presents moments of “realness” to showcase that she is more than just her online persona and gives the audience the belief that she is inviting them to view the “real” her.

By disclosing an “unedited” and vulnerable self on camera, Aina allows the audience to identify with her almost like they would with a friend. People often commented that they felt like they were hanging out in the same room with her, or felt like they were doing everything together. For instance, Britney Chambers (2020) who writes:

I must say that even though I was not present and am watching from the other side of a screen, I felt as if I was literally in the same room as them. Loving, warm, girl power vybez!

By creating an intimate atmosphere, the audience feels closer to the influencer. Commenters engage as if they are sitting down with their best friend, getting ready together, and discussing makeup, or receiving life advice from a trusted confidante.

Aina also fostered gendered intimacy as she projects a caring, sensitive persona. She plays a sisterly, or auntie role to her audience, giving them life advice, makeup tips, and general self-care tips. She projects a supportive image that she wants to help make her subscribers lives better and provides an atmosphere where one feels like they are hanging out with a family member who they are doing makeup with. Aina also uses her relationship to build intimacy with her fans. Aina gave glimpses of her heteronormative relationship with her partner, Dennis. This allowed for fans to get a glimpse of her personal life on-screen. She would mention him casually throughout her videos, plans they had together, and included him in a facial beauty routine video.

The code of expertise was also found in Aina's videos and comments. Part of ones understanding of the beauty community's definition of authenticity is that the gurus do have some form of "expertness" about themselves (García-Rapp, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). That is, they must know what they are talking about and what they are doing. In the videos themselves, Aina pulls out pamphlets, references the internet, uses her past experience as a MAC cosmetics employee, and her experience as a beauty guru to educate her audience both on the product and the techniques she uses to apply makeup onto her skin.

Her audience seems to appreciate how educated she is on the topics she speaks about. CC\_isgreat shared, "Thankyou Auntie Jackie for literally discussing the organic chemistry behind this mascara"(2019). Similarly, Kyna Boone (2019) replies, "I love you girl. I learned to color correct from you and so much more." Another comments, "I'm obsessed with your videos. Watching them has taken my makeup skills to another level. I get so many compliments on my makeup now, before not so much..." (LB\_121, 2020), etc. Her audience seems to suggest that by being an "ordinary expert" they are then able to achieve the same looks she presents them. Aina will also post videos where she applies makeup while discussing topics such as marriage, race, colorism, controversies, unpopular opinions, etc. The audience seems to suggest that her non-biased, transparent, and educated conversations leave them feeling like they have learned something.

However, some do question her expertise. Commenters questioned: “Jackie is one of my favorites to watch but boy was this video annoying. Why review it if the shade is off? I felt as though the entire video was made for the company and not the YouTube audience” (ODDGIRLINVIDEOS, 2019). Jennie Smythe (2019) asks, “if teydidnt send you’re color. Why review it.” Another commenter writes, “Unpopular opinion: please blend your eyeshadows together they look like a 12 year old starting to do makeup did them...” (It’s Jazlyn, 2020) and “she wants to be way lighter than she really is she doesn’t like to stick to the shades she really need to be in SHE WAY DARKER THAN THE SHADES SHE USE” (Tamaja West, 2020). These commenters critique her credibility and expertise. But such critiques do not seem to represent the collective as a whole.

Aina’s presentation of being an “everyday girl” seems to perpetuate a positive response to her self-brand. While the data collected from the comments section was overwhelmingly positive, some comments criticized her or critiqued her. One writes, “Jackie: I don’t fit in the beauty community. Also Jackie: has a mansion, great camera, nice clothes, tons of makeup 🙄 (Jennifer Rojas, 2020). Another writes, “Girl I love you to death you are fucking hilarious, but I don’t like this flexing part of you. You’ve earned your success hands down, but this projecting shit is a little tiresome” (Toasty Toxic, vid 2019). These comments seem to suggest that Aina’s presentation of being the “everyday girl” fails for some audience members, as her attempt to hide her class status online. However, my data only collected 300 comments per video and thus may not represent the overwhelming public.

When looking at fan responses it becomes clear to see that the audience views authenticity as a mix of the “ordinary girl,” who one views as family or a friend, who also provides a sense of authority and serves as an educator role. Referring to her as “Auntie Jackie” and Jackie herself calling her fans “The Jackie Aina Family” Aina’s community fosters an intimate and educational sphere. The sense that Aina cares about her fans is evident in audience come its on her videos and is central to this “everyday girl” authenticity. Jackie Aina is thus seen as an “everyday girl” to her audience.

## **Jeffree Star**

Jeffree Star's videos presented a distinct take on authenticity. While he attempted to display the "everyday girl" authenticity, his class, social influencer status, and a focus on his Jeffree Star Cosmetics brand created a different approach to being seen as "real." I call Star's approach "aspirational authenticity". Throughout the course of this study, information was revealed about Star's involvement in the accusations of fellow beauty guru James Charles being a sexual predator. When this information came to light, Star began to lose his credibility, honesty, and authenticity. Fans then began to comb through his old content and dig for clues of inauthenticity. In the comments, fans looked for the cracks in his projected image. However, before this scandal, Star has been involved in multiple instances in which his authenticity has been questioned.

When watching Star's content and fans comments, one thing that became clear was the rampant self-promotion of his makeup company's products, through his makeup tutorials, vlogs, and product announcement videos. In fact, the very first video of Star's makeup content was the introduction of his makeup line Jeffree Star Cosmetics. His content always highlights that he cares about quality, packaging, and making the best products he can for his customers. He promotes his products (sponges, brushes, makeup) in his videos, and spotlights release dates on his channel. He does giveaways, gives inside looks into his business, and leaves description links to his products in his comments section of his videos.

In the comments section, fans seem to be loyal to both Jeffree and the brand, yet tended to gravitate towards his products in the comments section when they were advertised in his videos. Consumerism is rampant in the comments with people sharing about how they will purchase his products or discuss the quality of said products. People share, "...your products are crazy n hot!!! lly your brand ❤️🔥 (Josselyne Aguirre, 2019), or "I'm late but I bought this today! Soooo Happy! I love you so much Jeffree 💙😘 ✨" (Caroline H, 2020), and "I just received my blue blood palett and OMFG ITS AMAZING!!!!..." (tinasAsylum, 2020). Other comments also had consumerist undertones, with

fans stating how badly they needed his products, showing brand loyalty, and sharing with others where they could buy his products. Star's fans in the beauty community seem to be loyal to the brand. They state or imply that they will purchase his products, share their love for the products, suggest ideas for new makeup lines, and buy into the image that is Star and his company.

Star's self-brand and authenticity had aspirational messages and undertones in his content. In his videos he often mentions how he came from nothing to becoming a successful businessman, and that the life he has now isn't the life he had before. His content and brand serves as a reminder to the audience that they too can become big if they work hard, are passionate, and live their dreams. Fans who struggle to see Star as real or relatable may instead see him as aspirational. This could indicate that fans may aspire to achieve the same type of lifestyle that Star has acquired. For instance, one commented, "you are my inspiration because you grew up not rich even in the tiniest bit and neither am I so one day I hope to be as hardworking and amazing as you..." (Kady Hopkins, 2020). Others write, "I love your makeup so much your the best Jeffree Star and your the reason why I want to be a makeup artist" (Dashanta Price, 2020), or "I really can't believe all Jeffree has been through and what he accomplish. Its such an inspiration, he started his company from zero and look at him now. I really love makeup and I would love to do what he does one day, and actually watch him succeed makes me so happy for him and kinda hopeful. Just needed to send him love somehow♥(yiye mind, 2020). Star's brand creates inspiration, and fans who watch his content feel empowered that maybe one day they will make it too.

Star also claims transparency. In a number of different videos he states, "I'm always going to be fully honest and transparent with you guys..." (Star, 2019a) or "I want to be one hundred percent transparent with you guys" (Star, 2019c). Star also reiterates, "You know me for being brutally honest and keeping it real" (Star, 2019c) or "You guys tell Shane that it is okay to be honest. We need to give them reality" (Star, 2019b). Star goes out of his way to relay to his audience that he is being one hundred percent 'real', spilling the tea, or transparent. These are clear attempts to demonstrate a kind of honesty to his community.

In the comments, it is clear that fans also expect both Star and the community as a whole to be transparent. Through their comments both subtly and unsubtly they seem to suggest that in order to be authentic one needs to expose the truth and be honest to their audience. Commenter Mcneece Wangui shared, “I like that he keeps it real regardless of whose products he is reviewing...” (2020). Another fan, Heather and Kids, wrote “Hi Jeffree! I love watching your videos cuz you are completely honest about the products you test out.” (2019). Goofey goober pointing out his controversialist past shared, “say whatever you want about Jeffree but he’s still about the only popular guru that gives their full, honest opinion regardless of who made the product” (2020).

Other fans point out that they like that he is honest in the product reviews he does with comments along the lines of “...trust your reviews” (Miss Jewells, 2020); “... so honest. No hold back right up front” (Amie Covell, 2020) and “...thank you for making such honest videos!!!!” (Erica Kelley, 2020). By identifying Star as honest and transparent, specifically with respect to the products he reviews, commenters treat Star as “real.”

This trustworthiness and transparency could also be shown through Star’s race. In a community that caters to white people, Star was able to access more makeup products that worked for his skin, which allowed for him to give more honest reviews because the shades he was sent matched his skin-tone. This could have given him more credibility and trustworthiness to his audience.

Not only do fans respect that he is honest in the products that he sells, but they appreciate the transparency he has in his personal life. When Star reveals personal traumas, surgeries, deaths, breaks ups, fans reiterate how much they value his transparency/honesty with them. This could possibly make them feel closer to the gurus in their community. When discussing his botched lip surgery, one fan, Daniela Hinchman wrote, “wow, your transparency in this video is so comforting. I hate my filters so much. They’ve made me so insecure and I am looking so forward to getting them removed” (2021). Others shared similar struggles from the death of pets to relationship difficulties.

While people praised his transparency, others questioned his authenticity. For instance, some criticized him for monetizing certain videos that they felt shouldn't have been monetized. On YouTube, monetization is the ability to earn a profit off of the videos that a content creator posts onto their channel. The creator then makes a profit based off the amount of views the video gets, as well as additional income if they are eligible to post an advertisement on their video. Monetization can be activated through view counts and having advertiser-friendly content (i.e. family friendly). Monetization can be seen through pop up advertisements or a 10-20 second advertisement before or during the video. Videos that do not meet a specific viewer count or included crude language, or anything not PG-13 friendly, risks not being monetized. Content creators also have the option to monetize their videos and can choose not to do so at any point.

These concerns about monetization are evident in Star's infamous "We Broke Up" video, which had Star sitting on his bed with his dogs letting his fans know that his years long relationship with Nathan was over. One fan wrote, "Congratulations finally made a lot of money from this breakup 😂⚡ YouTubes top 20 videos of 2020 🙌" (Vidhi Sharma, 2020). While others questioned how long he kept up appearances of the relationship to sustain his image/fans expectations. Still others called out clickbait titles or demanded "receipts" to some of his claims when things were not as he advertised or when information did not add up for some subscribers.

Star also attempts to show vulnerability in his videos. He allows his viewers to come into his messy home, cries when his dog dies, lets his fans see him getting his lips fixed from a botched surgery, his worries about moving, apologizing for his mistakes, and breaking up with his boyfriend. He also shows business vulnerabilities through worrying if a launch is going to go well, his makeup line being stolen, and letting people get a sneak peek behind the scenes of how his makeup business is run. By providing these moments he showcases that while he may be a rich, celebrity-like figure, he is still a human being.

Star also performs gendered intimacy. In the beauty community, gendered norms exist, but men are not expected to follow the traditional masculine gender performances in the

makeup community. With big names such as James Charles, Patrick Starr, and Jeffree Star, men tend to follow more traditionally feminine norms in the beauty community. State tends to play up his breaking up the traditional gender roles/performances. Star also uses his relationship with his boyfriend Nathan, in order to show instances of intimacy and vulnerability with his audience. He shows moments of vulnerability through showing the intimacy of his relationship with his boyfriend and subtly showcasing the realities of being gay with comments such as, “oh look we belong here” (Star, 2019d).

The attempt to be relatable is also key to presenting realness. In Star’s case, his lavish lifestyle and social class created a barrier for relatability and led to some alienation with his audience. Star seems to be aware of these class status differences. This class difference creates a barrier for the audience to connect with Star in this way and may lead the audience to question his motives and values. This can lead to a disconnect that could cause an audience to believe a guru is inauthentic if they cannot relate to them.

Comments associated with his social class and being unrelatable were prevalent throughout the videos. While some commenters aspired to reach Star’s status, the majority of comments suggested that class status served as a barrier between Star and the community. In vlogs where Star gave his friend Shane Dawson \$15,000 worth of Gucci merchandise or disposed of \$1,000,000 worth of expired makeup, members of the beauty community lamented the wastefulness or unattainability of such luxury. Comments included “I can’t believe how rich u r my family hardly have a 100 dollars” (oneilka110, 2020) and “he makes me so mad he has so much money and spends it on stupid shit no hate still sub but there are better thing to spend your money on the just gucci” (SarahEL, 2020). Other commenters write, “This is barking mad. Someone spending 15k on tat for another YouTube grifter. Please wakeup people. This is not real. 95% of the population can’t do this shit...” (Shaun Johnson, 2020) and “Jeffrees trash is worth more than my whole life” (Trisha Rebullida, 2020). These responses indicate fans do not mind if Star has money, as long as they do not flaunt it to the extreme or diminish those with less.

Fans also poked fun at the fact that Star was so unrelatable. In order to connect with fellow commenters in the beauty community and fans of Star, they would make fun of Star or find “real” aspects of himself in order to relate to Star and make him more real. This could be seen through comments of “I love how Jeffree is super high end loves expensive things but LOVES TACO BELL AND DOESNT CARE” (Alliyah Garcia, 2020) or “...when he drops the box multiple times and also when he keeps trying to squirt out some product and none came out. Haha been there myself...” (Irene S, 2020) and “Jefferys concerned about losing a 60,000 Burkin and then there’s me worried about losing my phone or my lipstick (which is like not even that much money in his eyes ahha... (Jasmine Lynch, 2020). By finding things that they are able to relate to, they then attempt to create a relationship with Star. If they cannot relate to Star, they laugh with the audience when they know Star’s guru life-style is not attainable for the majority of his followers. While these comments may be read as ironic, I believe that these were genuine attempts for fans to attempt to connect to one another as they found common ground with each other over not being able to relate to him.

In many videos, Star includes encounters with fans. The vlogs show fan encounters at meet and greets, in parking lots, food places, and more. Given that he resides in California, Star encounters many online fans in his offline life. In these encounters, Star is “genuine,” “nice,” “caring,” and “friendly” to his fans. In the videos he takes his time to meet with them, ask them questions, is willing to take pictures/give hugs, and other celebrity behaviors. These performances seem to resonate with the audience. Fans seem to respond with typical responses of “I live for the way that Jeffree treats people in public” (Terri R, 2020), “your always so good to fans” (Andy Christensen, 2020) or “I love how every time Jeffree goes somewhere he ALWAYS has a mini meet n greet” (Luisa Rappazo, 2020). Fellow commenter, Astrid Chatoe (2019) writes “I love how much Jeffree loves his fans. Seeing Jeffree talk to the people who are taking pics with him, you can see that he truly cares about people. Its truly precious ❤️.” Showing these fan encounters allows for Star to portray his persona in an offline world, and then project it online in his videos, which could then enhance his “realness.” By showing

these fan encounters Star also informs audiences opinions on what an influencer should be like when they can meet them in real life.

In 2020, it came to light that Jeffree Star was involved in orchestrating the false accusations about James Charles being a sexual predator. He was alleged to have manipulated fellow beauty guru Tati to post the infamous video “BYE SISTER.” She then uploaded a video in 2020, “BREAKING MY SILENCE...” detailing Jeffree Star’s involvement and the lies he told her, which led to her posting the original video. It was also revealed that Star perpetuated fabricated claims about his prior friend and business partner Trisha Paytas. This led to a conversation on the exposing of falsity and an attack on his authenticity as many had lost their trust in Star.

After these revelations, many commenters called him out on his lies and promises to change. Some visited earlier videos and wrote things like, “well this aged like milk...” (Millimai HEM, 2021). Others commented, “he really said I’ve grown a lot as a perso... 2020: ... am I a joke to you? No seriously like am I joke” (cate g, 2021). People began to call him out for treating his friends like garbage and many seemed interested in rewatching the videos to discover his lies. It was not uncommon to find the phrase “Who’s watching this after Jeffree Star Cancelled?” (Eroll Daylo Tanola-11, 2021) in the comment sections of his videos.

In his apology videos people chastised him for not being fully transparent with them, and were upset that Star said he was choosing not to reveal publicly things that would clear his name because he did not want to start more drama. Comments criticized the brand, the products, and Star’s credibility. Star failed to be transparent with his audience. To respond to this failure of transparency, Jeffree uploaded a video promising a change. However, the audience continued to criticize him and as controversy begat controversy, his image was tarnished. Fans began split into three camps: fans who chose to forgive him, fans who cancelled him, and fans who still bought his products but chose not to watch his content anymore. This stark criticism of Star shows how important authenticity and the appearance of being trustworthy, honest, and realness is to the community in both the guru world and its fans.

This examination of Star's content and his fans responses suggests an aspirational authenticity that contains an internal contradiction. Star attempts to be relatable while he also wants to be set apart and looked at for inspiration. Thus, he showcases intimacies and vulnerabilities on-screen, bringing in private off-line information into the public sphere. However, he simultaneously sets himself apart from his audience through his lavish lifestyle and status by reveling in the fame and the money that comes from this business. He invites the viewer in by showing them instances of realness and also becomes an object of desire. Viewers get glimpses into his life and wants the celebrity lifestyle and the products he shows on-screen. People watch Jeffree and wish they could be him and have the things he has.

### ***Comparing Authenticity***

Jackie Aina and Jeffree Star's presentations of authenticity shared some commonalities between the "everyday girl" and aspirational forms. Both beauty gurus attempt to project realness through assuring transparency, relatability, vulnerability, and some form of authority power. The biggest commonality between Aina and Star's presentations of authenticity seem to be typical in the medium itself, being transparent about their off-screen personal lives.

However, class and celebrity-statuses change the dynamic of how both are perceived. Aina presents herself as the "everyday girl" even though she has 3 million subscribers. Her videos do not show her interacting with fans, flaunting her wealth, or pushing her products to her audience. Unlike Aina, Star chooses to include his fan interactions, is known for his expensive and luxurious lifestyle, and pushes the image of a businessman. These subtle editing choices contribute to distinct presentations of authenticity. Both film in their respective rooms, do close ups of their faces while reviewing makeup, and attempt to provide an intimate and vulnerable space with their fans. However, the content they choose to leave in or edit out makes a difference in how they are perceived. Star does not hide his class or celebrity status. He includes the meet and greets, random fan encounters, business events, etc. While Aina tends to edit those out of her videos. She will mention events but not show them. In 2019-2020 she included

only one or two fan encounters in her videos. She also tended to shy away from her social influencer status. This could contribute to Star's aspirational authenticity as compared to Aina's "everyday girl" authenticity.

These subtle differences in presentation could possibly explain the differences in the nature of the comments that Aina and Star receive, however more research must be done. For Star, there is almost a disconnected air to the comments. Subscriber comments can be seen as directed to each-other as much as it is to Star. He attracts more trolls and attention than Aina receives. Aina's presentation of being the "everyday girl" and a family friend figure shapes the audience to be more connected with Aina and does not seem to attract negative attention, at least from the data that I collected. The ways in which the gurus portrayed transparency is also seen in the differences of Aina and Star. By attempting transparency, Star creates a disconnectedness from the kind of everydayness that Aina projects. The audience also questioned the transparency of both Aina and Star, however the way they were handled could indicate the effectiveness of each authenticity.

When creating clickbait content, false advertising for what the video is actually about, Aina got a far more positive response. In her videos she would be transparent in said video that she was click-baiting her audience, but only in order to beat the YouTube algorithm so that she could get more views. Star on the other hand did not acknowledge the falsity of his videos, which spurred some of the audience to respond negatively. However, creators can delete comments in their videos, so it is unclear if Aina chose to delete her negative comments or if the audience responded positively to her transparency of her lying to them.

Another difference is how race tied into their authenticities through intimacy/vulnerability and credibility. Aina is black. Star is white. Race is a constant topic for Aina because it is a part of her daily life. Unlike Star, who doesn't seem to think about his race, Aina is confronted with racism, exclusion, and fighting for her voice to be heard, and to be a positive change for people of color and the black community in the makeup world. Her identity and brand is about confronting these issues to improve the industry and to give

black girls and boys a space to look beautiful online. Star's whiteness however, provides him privilege, more opportunities in the makeup world, and possibly gaining a larger audience.

The role of gender in these presentations of authenticity is complicated. While Aina leaned into the maternal, caring, "let me take care of you" kind of way, people did not seem to respond or engage on specifically gendered terms. The same could be said about Star. He subverted the traditional masculine role while also taking on a more feminine gender performance. While Star is known for his wigs, feminine outfits, and for going outside of the gender norms, it did not seem to determine a difference in authenticity. This was shown with sexuality as well. Clips were inserted with their significant others in order to show insights into their personal life.

Aina and Star also differed in the fact that Star had to reclaim his authenticity. Subject to controversies and questioning his character, Star had to rebuild his identity. He tended to just make an apology video and then upload as normal. The apology videos seemed to make some difference for fans who were on the fence. However, it seemed to make little difference in the content of his videos and the way he presented himself online. Aina never experienced such controversies or lost the connection to her audience. Commenters did not question her motives, beliefs, or values. Her audience were convinced that she was authentically herself. She was consistent in her videos, her values stayed the same throughout her content, and she seemed to be transparent with her audience at all times. Her fan base saw no reason to question her character. For Star, he had to uphold his image and almost maintain the aspirational image he had created for himself to seem like he was someone that could be trusted and depended on as his intentions, his expertise, his content, etc. became questioned. Further studying needs to be done in order to understand how one recovers from a controversy. As Star is a unique case in which he gets cancelled for a few months and then goes back to business as normal.

Despite their distinct presentations of authenticity, the audiences of both Aina and Star relied on similar cues to determine realness or authenticity. Firstly, to be authentic in the

beauty community, one must be transparent. There is an unspoken code that honesty is essential in order to be authentic. Secondly, for beauty community members performances of intimacy and vulnerability were needed to showcase realness. By relaying personal information, insecurities, or bringing the private into the public sphere, these influencers allowed others to see the “hidden” parts of themselves. Thirdly, the performance of relatability or aspirational narratives are crucial to maintaining an image of authenticity. This allowed for community members to then see gurus as a “everyday person” or as someone that one can aspire to be. In sum, as Baker and Rojek (2020) found in their study of authenticity of lifestyle gurus, authenticity to the beauty community is the performance of realness. I have shown, however, that these performances can take distinct forms: the “everyday girl” or aspirational. This could indicate that more presentations of authenticity exist in the community and in social media.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

The purpose of my study was to understand how authenticity is portrayed and understood in the beauty community, specifically the makeup community, online on YouTube. Questions of how race, gender, and sexuality were also considered in how they may play a role in being considered “real” in the community. I also wanted to understand how the community found someone to be inauthentic online.

My research found that that authenticity is indeed a performance. Through these observations of how authenticity presented oneself in Aina and Star and their fans, two presentations of authenticity came to light: “everyday girl” authenticity and aspirational authenticity. My findings indicate that authenticity can be performed by fitting different molds. However, being seen as relatable, in some sort of way, was key in each performance. Future research in the beauty community could explore if there are more than just these two forms of authenticity in the community.

Similar to Baker and Rojek’s (2020) commentary on online communities of lifestyle gurus, beauty gurus were seen as authentic when they disclosed personal information, showed vulnerability, attempted to be relatable, and demonstrated transparency. My account of the “everyday girl” authenticity reconfirmed García-Rapp’s (2017a, 2017b, 2019) observation of the beauty community, in that the guru needs to be seen as an “ordinary expert.” They have to be seen as ‘real’ while also being educational. My research suggests that if one is not seen as “ordinary” they have the potential to be seen as aspirational, if they can maintain some sort of relatability with their audience.

The beauty community seems to not question the guru’s authenticity if the gurus project this image of being the “everyday girl” or aspirational—that is, until information comes to light that questions their realness, or if the guru fails to project transparency, honesty, or hides personal information from them, as seen with Star. To recover their image and self-brand, gurus must then reiterate their realness by portraying themselves as real through reiterating transparency, opening up about their lives, and addressing the issues and how they are going to change. By maintaining the codes of realness in the community, they then attempt to gain back the trust of their audience in order to be seen

as authentic again. However, to fully look into this, one needs to look into the origins and developments of authenticity as this may indicate how one retains or loses authenticity.

When looking at the failure of authenticity, I believe that the audience will assume the gurus are being authentic if they have already established some authority with their audience and have built that trust with the audience. However, one is still left with the question of does the beauty community extend this expectation of realness to other influencers in the community or is this uniquely suited towards Star? In my research, Aina's audience seemed to respond positively to her "everyday girl" performance, however there were a few who saw the cracks in the performance. Further research could look at how the "everyday girl" performance can lead to a failure in authenticity. Another question that arose from this research was, how do different forms of authenticity relate to controversies. Is a controversy more damaging to "everyday girl" authenticity or aspirational authenticity? Are certain forms of authenticity comparatively more sensitive to scandal or disruption?

There were some limitations to this study. Firstly, the case studies chosen to study the beauty community were two prominent influencers who had millions of followers. A third case study, most likely one who had a smaller audience, could have been chosen to compare with larger influencers. Secondly, interviews could have been added to gain a deeper perspective on the audience members views of authenticity. Due to time constraints, interviews were not possible in this study. Thirdly, these case studies are not spokespersons for race, class, gender, and sexuality. Further studies on this topic in the community need to be explored to understand their impact and influence on authenticity. Fourthly, by only studying one platform (YouTube), this study only explores how the beauty community understands and performs authenticity in video format. Cross comparing platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, could also be added in order to see if authenticity in the beauty community changes or stays the same depending on the platforms that one is using to connect with their audiences and fan bases. Lastly, more research needs to be done on the failure of authenticity by studying various cases of influencers in the community who have encountered scandals and controversies to see

the various ways in which influencers repair or fail to regain their authenticity within their respective audiences.

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