

Branding the Post-Feminist Self: Girls' Video Production and YouTube

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A YouTube video posted July 25, 2008, is titled “i kissed a girl” (kpal527). In the video, two young white American girls, 12 to 13 years old, dance and sing to the popular hit song by teen idol Katy Perry, “I Kissed a Girl,” in what looks to be a typical middle-class teenage girl’s bedroom, with a bed and dresser in the background, toys, books, and pink blankets strewn on the floor. The video was filmed using a webcam, with a fairly low-quality image and no close-ups or any camera movement. The girls, wearing shorts and t-shirts branded with popular commercial logos, are clearly having fun in front of the camera—at times the dance turns silly, they giggle throughout, interrupting their own singing, making faces to the camera. At the time of writing, there were 42 comments evaluating the dance performance in the feedback (“text comments”) section of this YouTube video. One comment, from sophieluvzu, stated: “LMAO! I can’t say anything bad about them, because I remember when I was this young I made dances up like this but suppose its for fun, although I didn’t know what youtube was back then J.”

This amateur video is one of thousands posted on YouTube featuring adolescent or teenage girls dancing and singing to popular music, referencing commercial popular culture, and presenting themselves for display. YouTube has clearly established itself as a place for the posting of videos that chronicle everyday life. A website with which many individuals around the world are now familiar, YouTube was the most popular entertainment website in Britain in 2007, and it was consistently in the top ten most visited websites globally in early 2008 (Burgess

and Green 2). Of course, YouTube is not only a video site for youth video exhibition; the site is a platform for audiovisual content of all kinds, from user-created videos to broadcast media content to presidential addresses.

YouTube was launched in 2005 as a user-friendly site to upload, store, and share individual videos. It was acquired by Google in 2006 for \$1.65 billion, and has expanded to become a primary commercial venue for marketing music, movies, and television, while retaining its original identity. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green state, YouTube is a “particularly unstable object of study,” in part because of its “double function as both a ‘top-down’ platform for the distribution of popular culture and a ‘bottom-up’ platform for vernacular creativity” (6). While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyze YouTube in general terms as a media and cultural space, I argue that the website’s “double function” as a platform for both commercial and vernacular creative content offers an opportunity to think critically about the ways in which YouTube is a site for self-promotion or the creation of the “self-brand.” In particular, I examine user-created YouTube videos that specifically invoke what might be called the “post-feminist” self-brand, as these videos, like “i kissed a girl” mentioned above, both support and perpetuate a commercial post-feminist discourse in which girls and young women are ostensibly “empowered” through public bodily performances and user-generated content.

The transition of YouTube from its earlier incarnation as a personal “digital video repository” to its now well-known function as a place wherein one can “broadcast yourself” is not simply an effect of the expansion of Web 2.0 technologies (Burgess and Green 5).

“Broadcasting yourself” is also a way to brand oneself, a practice deployed by individuals to communicate personal values, ideas, and beliefs using strategies and logic from commercial brand culture, and one that is increasingly normative in the contemporary neoliberal economic

environment. Additionally, public self-expression and self-branding is validated by the cultural context of post-feminism which, among other things, connects gender empowerment with consumer activity (Hollows and Moseley; McRobbie, *The Aftermath*; Tasker and Negra). These entangled discourses of neoliberal brand culture, Web 2.0 interactivity, and post-feminism all rely ideologically and materially on individuals becoming what Nikolas Rose might call the entrepreneur of the self (Rose). The ideals and accomplishments of the post-feminist subject— independence, capability, empowerment—are also those that define the neoliberal subject (Gill). These, in turn, are supported and enabled by similar ideals and assumptions about the contemporary interactive subject who realizes her individual empowerment through and within the flexible, open architecture of online spaces.

YouTube is but one cultural space located at the nexus of these discourses, but because of the site's dynamic capacity for individual public performances and viewers' comments and feedback, it has become an ideal space to craft a self-brand. Of course, my focus on girls' post-feminist self-branding on YouTube indicates that I am looking at only one kind of production practice out of the multitudes that take place via digital media and only one subgenre of video that is posted on YouTube. There are many different kinds of girls' media production in online spaces, as well as on YouTube itself, so user interactivity and the space of the Internet as one of possibility needs to be analyzed in particular, specific terms. For this study, I examined amateur videos that feature young girls dancing, singing, or "vlogging" (video blogging) to the camera about mundane activities, found using such search terms as "girls dancing," "girls singing," "girls playing around." While thousands of such videos come up when using these search terms, I examined approximately 100 videos, and focus here on a small group that exemplify some of the strategies involved in self-branding, paying particular attention to the feedback that

accompanies these videos.¹ Viewer feedback on YouTube videos establishes a kind of relationship between the posted video, the videomaker, and viewers, much like the way consumers comment and evaluate on products they purchase.

In the following pages, I will first offer a brief discussion of the contemporary rhetoric that shapes cultural notions of online user interactivity, focusing specifically on YouTube's role in this rhetoric. I will next turn to the ways in which contemporary relationships between girls and identity-making have been framed, especially in terms of post-feminism. Then, I will discuss neoliberalism and brand culture, as a way to provide a framework for analyzing girls' self-branding practices on YouTube. Finally, I offer an analysis of user feedback, arguing that this component of online activity is crucial to the logic of self-branding.

“Living Online”: Online User Interactivity and YouTube

A recent 2009 Nielsen Online study confirmed what is for most middle-class Americans a truism already: “kids are going online in droves—at a faster rate than the general Web population—and are spending more entertainment time with digital media” (Shields). The report continues by stating that as of May 2009, the 2- to 11-year-old audience had reached 16 million, or 9.5 percent of the active online universe. Kids, the report claims, “are all but living online” (Shields). This notion of “living online” has generated speculation about its meaning, with scholars, educators, and parents debating the effects of online activity (Goodstein; Montgomery; Palfrey and Gasser; Tapscott). Much of the discourse surrounding the Internet focuses, from a range of negative and positive vantage points, on its democratizing potential. There are multiple reasons as to why the Internet is understood as a democratizing space: to name but a few, its flexible architecture, the relative accessibility of the technology, the capacities for users to

become producers, the construction of the Internet as participatory culture (boyd; Burgess and Green; Castells; Jenkins). To these more optimistic characterizations of the Internet, challenges have been launched, especially those focusing on the multitude of ways the market has and continues to shape what content is on the Internet, the labor that produces this content, and the conditions of possibility for future content (Andrejevic, *iSpy*; Dean; Schiller; Terranova).

Because of a previous historical context that situated girls and their practices as outside, both literally and intellectually, the realm of technology (usually because of girls' assumed "natural" deficiency when it comes to technological acuity), the ever-increasing presence of girls online—and what they do when they are there—has been the particular focus of recent scholarly analysis (e.g., Dobson; Kearney; Mazzarella; Stern, "Expressions"). Much of this work has challenged traditional communication research that links technological use (ranging from watching television to participating in chat rooms) to harmful social effects, and thus has opened up scholarly and activist discourse about the potential benefits, especially for girls, for exploring the Internet as a space in which creative identity-making, among other things, might be possible. This work has detailed not only the various ways in which girls participate in online practices, but also the increase in video production by girls in the last several decades (Kearney).

Indeed, the fact that kids, and girls in particular, are using social media in increasing numbers raises a number of questions about empowerment, voice, and self-expression, but the answers are not simple. Not all online spaces are the same, nor contain the same possibilities for self-presentation and self-expression. Personal home pages, blogs, diaries, and self-produced videos all capitalize in different ways on the flexible architecture of the Internet as well as on its potential for user interactivity. Girls' self-presentation online is a contradictory practice, one that does not demonstrate an unfettered freedom in crafting identity any more than it is completely

controlled and determined by the media and cultural industries. As Marc Andrejevic has pointed out in his work on surveillance and corporate control in an online era, “the point of exploring the ways in which the interactivity of viewers doubles as a form of labor is to point out that, in the interactive era, the binary opposition between complicit passivity and subversive participation needs to be revisited and revised” (“Watching Television” 32). In particular, focusing on the opposing forces of passive and active participation distracts us from the ways in which consumption and production are imbricated practices, rather than isolated, discrete activities. That is, as Mary Celeste Kearney argues, focusing on the ways in which consumption and production activities form a kind of *relationship* allows scholars to resist theorizing about girls’ cultural activities within binaries of “production/consumption, labor/leisure, and work/play in their everyday practices” (5). Kathryn Montgomery echoes this notion in her work on youth, digital media, and civic engagement, where she argues, “Interactive technologies have created capabilities that alter the media marketing paradigm in significant ways, extending some of the practices that have already been put in place in conventional media but, more important, defining a new set of relationships between young people and corporations” (26).

This “new set of relationships” includes the relationship between the self and the brand. The market forces of neoliberal brand culture do not just capitalize on participatory culture or online identity making, in other words, but circumscribe and shape what we have come to know as “participation” and “identity.” As Anthony Giddens has characterized individual identity-making in modern society, identity is not understood or experienced as organic or static, but rather as a “project of the self,” where the crafting of one’s self is a constant dynamic, one that relies on media and other cultural spaces as a way to be “self-reflexive” and constantly work on, update, and evolve the construction of the self (5). David Buckingham characterizes this

“project of the self” in the specific context of youth and digital activity as one in which individuals “have to create biographical ‘narratives’ that will explain themselves to themselves, and hence sustain a coherent and consistent identity” (9).

The construction of the self is not an insular, isolated activity, but is rather situated in a media and cultural context that involves a dynamic between the self and others, or in the case of YouTube, between video content and user feedback. Of course, this is not only a generational dynamic but also a gendered one. That is, if kids are “living online,” part of this everyday life means, among other things, negotiating power relations and crafting gendered identity. In particular, the practices of “living online” are often similar to those central to post-feminism: Empowerment and constraint need to be understood in the particular context which not only validates their specific logic, but indeed makes specific definitions of power and constraint legible in the first place.

Broadcasting the Post-feminist Self

As a mainstream commercial website that often functions as a promotion vehicle, YouTube distributes videos that frequently rely on familiar commercial narratives about gender identity and the feminine. The videos I examined are part of what might be called post-feminist media culture, in which young girls are engaged in visual and virtual performances of “public femininity” (McRobbie, *The Aftermath* 60). This kind of public femininity is clearly evident in a recent YouTube video by Uzsikapicics called “13 year old Barbie Girls,” which had, at the time of writing, 777,085 views and 1226 feedback comments. The video, featuring six 13-year-old white girls, opens with a shot of a Barbie and Ken doll (and a tube of toothpaste adorned with images of Disney princesses) arranged on a chair. A young girl sits on the dolls, nonchalantly

fastens her shoes, stands up, turns on the stereo and begins to dance. She moves to the front door, opening it to two other girls, dramatically involved in putting on lipstick and other make-up. The girls, clearly mocking celebrity as well as beauty culture, air-kiss each other and also begin dancing to the song. The camera pans to two other girls, both of whom are actively involved in feminine grooming practices: one girl is looking at a teen magazine with Paris Hilton on the cover, while the other is occupied by dramatically brushing the hair of a small toy dog. In the next shot, the five girls sit together on a couch, performing a choreographed routine of crossing and uncrossing their legs. Another girl enters the room, and with a dramatic gesture sprays the girls with a spray can, who then collapse on the floor. As they get up together, they begin singing the commercially popular song by Aqua, “I’m a Barbie Girl,” with one girl brandishing what looks like a steak knife. The video ends with a last shot of the Barbie and Ken dolls, with one exception: Ken’s head has been cut off, the aforementioned steak knife sticking out of his neck. The vaguely political ending of the video—chopping Ken’s head off clearly calls into question his role as a crucial part of Barbie’s world—is offset by the silliness of the girls, who are obviously having fun, and demonstrates a central contradiction to this kind of “public femininity.”

It is certainly true that YouTube affords girls, such as the “13 year old Barbie Girls,” an opportunity to film themselves crafting gender identity through particular performances. And, it is clear that the technological space of the Internet is also a cultural and social space, one that is potentially expansive in terms of reimagining gender identity. Being in charge of one’s own identity development is clearly powerful, and new media seem to provide spaces to bring girls’ identities “into being,” or again, to “live online.” Exploring the challenges involved in being a “Barbie Girl” through a playful and parodic video, for instance, allows girls to both perform

gendered identity and to point out its contradictions (through the song, which satirizes the “Barbie Girl,” as well as cutting off Ken’s head). As many scholars have pointed out, online spaces provide a potentially expansive opportunity for girls to explore gender and sexual identities, through girl-oriented websites, home pages and personal profiles, and YouTube videos (Dobson; Grisso and Weiss). As Susannah Stern points out about girls’ home pages on the Web, girls often use these spaces as “a forum of self-disclosure, especially as a place to engage in self-expression” (“Virtually Speaking” 224).

Certainly, YouTube videos can be understood as spaces for self-disclosure or self-expression; one of the most desirable features of the site is that users can bypass the control of media gatekeepers by producing and distributing their own media images. Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell have recently argued that youth productions online are examples of “identities-in-action,” where young users combine old and new images in creative ways of establishing multifaceted identities. Like other scholars investigating identity-making online, Weber and Mitchell see youth online productions as self-reflexive, where media made by youth are also viewed by those youth, so that users constantly revisit their own web productions and update them, as well as see how many “hits” or response messages they might have generated. The fact that young people producing media online are their own audience demonstrates, for Weber and Mitchell, a “conscious looking, not only at their production (themselves), but how others are looking at their production” (27).

It is clear from this comment that online “production” can be collapsed with “self-production,” thus complicating a consumption/production binary. But who, or perhaps, what, is the girl “self” in YouTube videos? One way to address this question is to situate it within the context of post-feminism. Indeed, many of the videos I examined on YouTube are legible within

the broader cultural context of post-feminism, a context which is animated and enabled by neoliberal capitalism and the discursive space of participatory culture that structures much online activity. While post-feminism has been theorized as a practice, a set of representations, and an economic formation, I find Angela McRobbie's recent formulation the most useful: In the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, post-feminism forms a kind of "cultural space" that reflects "a field of transformation in which feminist values come to be engaged with, and to some extent incorporated across, civil society in institutional practices, in education, in the work environment, and in the media" (*The Aftermath* 15). McRobbie calls this engagement of feminism by contemporary culture "feminism taken into account," because it is a process in which feminist values and ideologies are taken into account only to be found dated or old-fashioned and thus repudiated. McRobbie characterizes this dynamic, between acknowledging feminism precisely as a way to discount it, as a "double-movement," noting the paradox of how the dissemination of discourses about freedom and equality provides the context for the retrenchment of gender norms and traditional gendered relations (*The Aftermath* 55).

Those ideals shaping the discursive and ideological space of the Internet (including creating and posting videos on YouTube)—freedom, equality, innovation, entrepreneurship—are the same discourses that provide the logic for girls' post-feminist self-branding, a practice that situates girls and young women ever more securely into the norms and values of hegemonic gendered consumer culture. This kind of self-branding is thus not just a tired re-hashing of the objectification of female bodies, but rather a new social arrangement, one that relies on strategies for identity construction that get their logic from more progressive ideals such as capability, empowerment, and imagination. Like the "new category of womanhood" McRobbie describes (*The Aftermath* 56), or what Anita Harris has called the "can-do" girl (13), the self-branded girl

is encouraged to be self-reliant and empowered, especially within a consumer context. Indeed, she is encouraged to *be* a product within a neoliberal context; she authorizes herself to be consumed through her own self-production.

The video “13 Year Old Barbie Girls” makes sense only because Mattel’s Barbie brand and its related discourses and ideologies are so recognizable. Even as the girls are acting out the “Barbie girl” by potentially challenging its limitations (indicated by chopping off Ken’s head), the Mattel brand structures, and thus limits, the kind of self-presentation that takes place. Although consumers have redeployed Barbie in many contexts as a way to resist or redefine the image of femininity validated by the doll’s popularity, even these subversions emanate from Barbie’s particular brand of femininity (Kearney; Rand). In other words, the girls in the video are not creating an entirely new image of gender using a fresh imaginative script, but rather working within and against a cultural definition of the feminine offered to (and recognized) by girls who have purchased and played with Barbie dolls. It is certainly true that appropriating and reworking material available in popular culture is a familiar practice for consumers, and one that does not necessarily function simply as a kind of economic practice.² However, many YouTube videos by girls depend upon gendered brand contexts that are commercially produced for profit in the media industries and emphasize hegemonic female sexuality: Disney Princess representations are featured prominently in girls’ bedrooms and on clothing; girls dance to songs by Beyoncé, Jennifer Lopez and other pop stars; posters on the walls in girls’ rooms depict popular heteronormative teen celebrities, movies, television programs, and retail outlets, such as Abercrombie and Fitch. The performances of the girls in the videos are also familiar, where the girls display and self-objectify the body through suggestive dance moves and clothing (often recognizable from MTV and other music video television channels).

In addition to the self-brand, the presence of commercial brands as structuring narratives for YouTube videos, then, indicates that self-disclosure, or self-presentation, does not imply simply *any* narrative of the self, created within an endlessly open cultural script, but one that makes sense within a cultural and economic context of recognizable and predetermined images, texts, beliefs, and values. The fact that some girls produce media—and thus ostensibly produce themselves through their self-presentation—within the context of a commercially-driven technological space is not only evidence of a kind of empowering self-work, but also a way to self-brand in an increasingly ubiquitous brand culture. In other words, the kind of branded visibility that often guides YouTube videos has historically engaged a kind of double mobilization, in which media producers create and make visible identities for the market, and individuals identifying with those representations recognize themselves (often for the first time) within the powerful media system. Branded post-feminism has only intensified in the online era, because it is supported by the contexts in which consumers are both more in control of their own productions and also increasingly under surveillance by media industries. This dynamic structures, for example, many YouTube videos in which girls perform dances to songs that have an “empowering” post-feminist message, such as “I Kissed a Girl” (Katy Perry), “All the Single Ladies” (Beyoncé), or “I Will Survive” (Gloria Gaynor). Traditional questions, therefore, raised by adolescents of “who am I?” become more about “how do I sell myself?” in a twenty-first-century commercial context that valorizes selling oneself—especially for girls—precisely as a process of figuring out personal identity (Stern, “Producing Sites”). As Amy Shields Dobson points out in her work on CamGirls (personal web sites that include video of their female owners captured via web cams) the contemporary cultural environment encourages girls to “become successful and powerful by means of opportunism, ingenuity, and self-promotion—through

selling themselves” (139).

Brand Culture and the Practice of Self-Branding

YouTube videos, then, do not exist in a social or cultural vacuum; they are posted on a site with the trademarked tagline “Broadcast Yourself,” and one that features advertising, in the form of banner ads posted on the site as well as more embedded forms of advertising found within the videos themselves. As Alison Hearn points out, “Work on the production of a branded ‘self’ involves creating a detachable, saleable image or narrative, which effectively circulates cultural meanings. This branded self either consciously positions itself, or is positioned by its context and use, as a site for the extraction of value (“Meat” 164-5).” The YouTube videos I analyzed provide this “detachable, saleable image,” and viewers’ comments on the videos determine (at least in part) the “value” of the image; this dynamic becomes “a validation of worth” (Dobson 127).

In other words, to return to the notion that middle-class American kids are “all but living online,” I want to suggest that this “life” is one that is often intricately linked (albeit in different ways) to the culture of branding. Broadly defined as the deliberate association of products and trademarked names with ideas, concepts, feelings, and relationships, brand culture creates a context within which consumer participation is not simply (or even most importantly) indicated by purchases, but by brand loyalty and affiliation, linking brands to lifestyles, politics, and social activism. Developing a self-brand on commercial social networking sites, such as YouTube, means that girls reference brands not simply as commodities, but as the context for everyday living. Even more specifically, this branded context for living supports practices by which individuals craft identities “as products capable of catching the attention and attracting demand

and customers” (Bauman 6). These self-brands—the self-as-product—on the YouTube videos I examined rely upon and validate post-feminist practices, in which particular narratives that connect individual empowerment and creativity with gendered consumption practices, such as displaying the hypersexualized body, particular beauty practices, and performances of stylized heterosexuality, are repeatedly circulated in ways that support normative gender relations rather than challenge them (Hollows and Moseley; McRobbie, *The Aftermath*).

And, indeed, social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, have been positioned recently (by scholars and marketers alike) as particularly powerful promotional spaces for this kind of self-branding; adolescents can develop a personal “brand” on these sites through video, textual information, media productions, and so on (boyd; Hearn, “Meat”). Unlike MySpace, Facebook, or other social networking sites, YouTube does not prominently feature complex user profile pages complete with personal information, such as “likes” and “dislikes,” popular cultural affiliations, and public listing of “friends” (although personal profiles are possible on YouTube). I nonetheless argue that YouTube may function as a kind of social networking site. While YouTube is also a space for commercially produced videos, as well as a place in which the videos that are posted are not always created by the person featured in the video, the site does allow Internet users with the means to make and upload videos to share these videos with friends, to establish links with other online sites, and to create “playlists.” The comments, both text and video, posted below videos, are valued for their quantity, as the number of these comments relates to the value of the video, a practice similar to accruing MySpace or Facebook “friends.”

Online self-branding (such as YouTube videos) utilizes the labor of consumers in re-imagining a “product” as the self. Indeed, the kind of technological convergence witnessed in

online spaces that has been celebrated for its flexibility and malleability makes it an especially fertile ground for self-branding. Branding management strategies have also capitalized on this flexibility, and have recognized the active, engaged online consumer interactivity as a way to “off-load” corporate labor, such as promoting a hit Beyoncé single or endorsing the brand image of Barbie (Andrejevic, *iSpy*). Within contemporary neoliberal society, where culture is seen as an economic resource, and brand culture in particular validates and supports shifting boundaries of what can and cannot be configured as a “product” to be sold, the “self” is branded, managed, and distributed within a cultural marketplace. And in some ways, the girls in the YouTube videos I examined perform what Maurizio Lazzarato and Tiziana Terranova have called “immaterial labor,” where the branded performances of the adolescent girls do a kind of promotional work. Immaterial labor, however, is not just the unpaid (and unrecognized, at least *as* labor) labor consumers do for corporations, but also the affective labor that produces not simply conventional products, but immaterial products such as knowledge, emotion, or relationships between producer and consumer in the self-brand.

Indeed, an entire industry has emerged around how to best craft this relationship: trade books with titles such as *Be Your Own Brand: A Breakthrough Formula for Standing Out from the Crowd* (McNally and Speak), *U R a Brand! How Smart People Brand Themselves for Business Success* (Kaputa), and *Make a Name for Yourself: Eight Steps Every Woman Needs to Create a Personal Brand Strategy for Success* (Fisher-Roffer) are situated alongside “how-to” forums online on the dos and don’ts of self-branding. Self-branding strategist Catherine Kaputa argues in her book, *U R a Brand!*, that while all people need to be self-brand “builders” in the contemporary marketplace, this is particularly true for women and girls: self-branding “is especially for women, women like myself, who were told as children, ‘Don’t upstage your

brother' or 'It's not nice to call attention to yourself.' The truth is, if you don't brand yourself, someone else will, and it probably won't be the brand you had in mind" (xvi). This sentiment taps into post-feminist discourses of empowerment, acknowledging that there have been historical obstacles for women to be independent, but that in the contemporary context, it is up to women to carve out space for themselves—and the best way to do this is to develop a brand. And, as most marketers who specialize in self-branding agree, within the current economic climate, it is imperative to utilize the strategies once reserved for branding products for the branding of oneself: "You'll learn how the branding principles and strategies developed for the commercial world may be used to achieve your business and personal potential. In short, you are a brand" (Kaputa xv). The brand context of YouTube thus anticipates particular performances, attitudes, and actions of girls' videos, seen through the musical choices of the girls, the commercially recognizable dances performed, the popular cultural references, the clothing worn—and the feedback that then functions to give these performances value.

To take just one example, the YouTube video titled, "13 year old miSS Dalazee Dancing to Single Ladies" features a 13-year-old African-American girl wearing a hot pink t-shirt, black cargo pants, and flashy jewelry, dancing to Beyoncé's "All the Single Ladies" in what looks to be her bedroom, as there are posters on the wall, and a bed, dresser, and TV in the room (MissDalazee). The girl follows Beyoncé's video routine carefully, ending the dance, as Beyoncé does, by pointing to her ring finger on her left hand. While the video itself is legible only within a certain commercial popular cultural vocabulary (a recognition of not only the song, but the dance as well), the feedback on the video situates it as a self-branding exercise. For example, one of the twenty-one comments states: "you are a very cute girl and you can dance very well. Ue seem a little camera shy but ii hope that you will get over that. Ii love the cargos & ii could

like to see more videos from you. Hoping you get discovered with both hands & feet crossed!! -- Pretty&Not paid.” This comment, as well as hundreds of others on similar YouTube videos, explicitly makes reference to the function of YouTube in “getting discovered,” ostensibly by the commercial media industries, and gives a certain “value” to the YouTube brand. Indeed, talent agencies for kids now often specialize in making kids online stars (often through social networking sites), thus institutionally constituting and legitimating YouTube and other social networking sites as lucrative venues for self-branding. As but one example of this kind of legitimation, on the popular “how-to” website, eHow.com, there is a listing on “How to be a star on YouTube,” with one “step” in the path to YouTube stardom being: “Come up with a concept that others will become addicted to when watching. It must be presentable as a series. It should be controversial, sensational or shocking. If it isn't any of these then inject it with your sex appeal, your incredible sense of humor or be bizarre. Each episode must terminate in suspense.”

While the YouTube videos that girls create, such as “13 year old MiSS Delazee,” are important forms of independent production, there nonetheless remains a predetermined cultural and economic script that structures such videos and the feedback that accompanies them, a script that is formulated within the vocabulary of self-branding and “how to be a star” (Dobson). The discourse of “how to be a star” is clearly available only to those who have resources, a fact which is obfuscated by the neoliberal “openness” of sites such as YouTube. That is, the notion that there are clear—and accessible—steps one can simply follow in order “to be a star” renders invisible how bounded those steps are in terms of age, race, and class. Individuals who are culturally marginalized (through law, policy, media representation, etc.) because of race or class, for instance, do not have the same access to the practice of self-branding as white, middle-class girls and women. What is at stake here, then, is that the normalization of self-branding

necessarily relies on particular practices of exclusion.

Who's Buying? The Role of Feedback

Performances on YouTube videos are validated by the number of views and comments the videos receive, which is in turn crucially significant to self-branding. Feedback is crucial to creating a self-brand; in order to sell oneself in a particular way, there must be a conscious recognition of the fact that other users are “buying,” even if feedback is negative (the logic of “all press is good press”). Feedback functions on YouTube as a way to create a continuous dynamic between a consumer/user and producer. This dynamic is neither top-down nor bottom-up, but ostensibly a meeting between the two, and thus *implies* a nonlinear power distribution from producer to consumer, no system or space controlling another.

Media production and feedback are more complicated than this optimistic view, however, and can also be considered as strategies of surveillance, judgment, and evaluation—practices signaling consumer agency, but simultaneously disciplining and constituting subjects. Just as all online media productions are not the same nor have the same purpose, not all feedback is the same. Feedback on girls' YouTube videos functions more often than not as a neoliberal disciplinary strategy, where videos are judged and gain value according to how well the girls producing them fit normative standards of femininity. YouTube feedback is part of a subgenre of online user activity that is often positioned by marketers as “evidence” of user interactivity: ranking products (such as customer rankings on Amazon.com), individuals (such as the website “Hot or Not,” the logic of which is self-explanatory), and media texts (such as those found on the TV review website Television Without Pity) (Andrejevic, “Watching Television”). Posting a video on YouTube is both an explicit and implicit request for this kind of feedback, and situates

videos as products to be evaluated by “customers.” As Hearn argues about self-branding on social network sites, “outer-directed self-presentation . . . trades on the very stuff of lived experience in the service of promotion and profit” (“Variations” 207-8). Importantly, feedback on YouTube forms a crucial element in the relationship between consumer and producer, so that judgment, ranking, and evaluation make the self-brand legible.

For instance, on the aforementioned “13 year old Barbie Girls” video, feedback ran the gamut from the creepy “I love all of u young girls” to the more embracing “LOL 13 year old boys aren’t like this! Women are just too sweet-hearted. Makes me sad to think of the way women are treated in this world.” Others commented on the high number of views: “763,292 views!!!! Anyway the girls are cute. . .but 763,292 views!!! For God sake the video is so stupid. . .sorry this is my opinion.” Most feedback on girls’ YouTube videos comments on normative physical appearance, “hotness,” and dancing skill. Comments ranging from “Damn girl, keep them coming” (signed “Stair Dance”) to “excellent body” (Lissawentworth) to “god help me & have mercy on my soul, this is so goddamn hot” (irisverygood) and “I wanna do these little snots” (coolcokeify) exercise a kind of control over the self-branding process of the girls’ self-presentations, situating videos squarely within a familiar script of objectifying the bodies of girls. Indeed, feedback for these videos do not invoke interactive dialogue so much as they work to establish the girls in the videos as more or less successful (in commercial terms) self-brands. (This is especially evident in those amateur videos that continue as web serials, or “webisodes.”) For example, a very popular webisode star is iJustine, the online persona of Justine Ezerik, who has made more than 200 videos and posted them on YouTube, including satires of television shows, interactive skits, and dancing in Apple stores. She has her own channel on Youtube, where she is a self-proclaimed “lifecaster.” Her video about wanting to order a cheeseburger got

over 600,000 YouTube views in one week, and at the time of writing, had over 2 million views (iJustine).

Consider also in this regard the YouTube video: the video “me & Nicole.. crazyyy” features two teenage white girls (approximately 14 to 16 years old) wearing shorts and bikini tops, singing and dancing to the song “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor (sofijakos465865). The girls are dancing in what is obviously one of their bedrooms, which includes bright pink walls, a white bed with stuffed animals on it, and posters of young male celebrities and retail stores on the walls. The video, which at the time of writing had 539,243 views and over 400 comments, seems to be a fairly typical teenage girl scenario—two friends dancing and singing to a popular song. Some of the comments on this video were quite engaged:

wtf was that. Seriously. I’m so tired of these girls thinking that putting up videos of them acting a fool is cute when its not. Its sad bc majority of the time they can’t dance and lack rhythm. . . just telling the truth here. U all know it but don’t say n e thin. And for the ones that do, I’m right there with ya. (cutie1472)

Others were simpler evaluative statements: “they really hot” (kaeben93) and “cheap, your 14!!” (woutvsas). Indeed, like this last comment, many videos posted by adolescent girls garnered judgmental comments about the age of the participants, so that along with comments that reduce girls to sexual objects are those that chastise girl producers for being too young either to be posting videos of themselves online or to be asserting themselves sexually.

This kind of feedback works to legitimate YouTube as a site for self-branding as it also contains girls and their gendered self-presentations within normative standards of judgment.

Many YouTube videos, like personal home pages or diaries, are both a public and private performance; public because they are displayed on a globally public social networking site, and private because they can answer the intensely personal question of “who am I?” But this narrative crucially depends on the dynamic of feedback, which provides a context fertile for self-branding. That is, if self-branding is part of a “project of the self,” then the conceptual crux of this project is feedback: evaluating or commenting on others’ self-disclosures “empowers” one as a consumer-cum-producer of content; yet it also reproduces normative identities and relations. Self-branding, much like the branding of products, is dependent upon the capability of ranking the product, in this case an adolescent girl, who is judged and produced as a subject. To be authorized to reconstitute someone *as* something—including something deviant, abnormal, or pathological—is as much a telling of one’s own story as a judgment of another’s. Self-branding does not merely involve self-presentation, but is a layered process of judging, assessment, and valuation taking place in a media economy of recognition, such as YouTube, where everyone has their “own” channel.

The promise of media interactivity is not only the promise of collapsing power relations between those who control information and those who consume it; it is also the promise of a new imaginative script, where subject formation can take place on a different kind of playing field, one with new conditions of possibility for thinking about identity formations, such as the gendered body. However, within commercial social networking sites, such as YouTube, the playing field is fraught with contradictions. Self-disclosure in one context can be empowering for girls and, in another, be a form of self-branding that is prescribed by a limiting cultural script. It is clear that there are spaces online in which gender identity is actively re-imagined; these spaces need to be placed in critical conversation with other spaces, such as YouTube, as a way to

formulate a more complex, even if contradictory, understanding of not only media “interactivity” but also the increasingly normative practice of the post-feminist self-brand.

Notes

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- ¹ For the purposes of this essay, I focus on gender in terms of the post-feminist self-brand, though it is clear that the videos I studied make particular statements about race and class also. For instance, most of the videos were filmed in what looked to be middle-class homes, indicated by the private bedrooms of the girls, the particular popular cultural displays on posters, music choice, branded clothing, etc. For more on girls' bedroom culture, please see Baker; Dobson; McRobbie, *Feminism*; and Montgomery. Additionally, the practice of self-branding is clearly racialized; the post-feminist idea of "empowerment through the body," which includes overtly and at times ironically sexualizing the body, is a racially-informed idea. That is, the bodies of girls of color and working-class girls have been already pathologized as hypersexual through policy, law, and media representation (among other things). So the rhetoric of "empowerment" through a sexualized body is not available in the same ways to all girls and women.
- ² It is also the case that girls have a limited range of resources available for cultural production, one that is determined by not only material resources and class status, but also generation. For more on this, see Seiter.

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