

Learning to Like the Likes and the Hate: The Labor of Internet Fame in the New Attention Economy

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ABSTRACT

How do people experience internet fame? Whereas public visibility and reputation were once tightly coupled, these can be decoupled in the new media attention economy. We illustrate this with an ethnography of virality. Going viral on social media can be a destabilizing experience, given the problems of hyper-visibility, context collapse, and hateful commentary from unknown audiences. Yet many people pursue online virality, reporting the experience to be pleasurable, even addictive. Bridging classic theories of deviance and emotions with science and technology studies, we examine how content creators learn to experience virality as affectively rewarding, akin to getting high on drugs. Through immersive ethnography and interviews with high-performing content creators, we develop a phenomenology of virality. We trace how platforms afford affective experiences with the strategic delivery of metrics, which creators learn to interpret as pleasurable as they interact with each other and with their screens. By documenting the embodied and affective experience of work on social media, we show a novel mode of labor control in the age of platforms.

Key words: virality; fame; platform labor; addiction; social media.

How do people experience internet fame? In the digital era, new pathways, platforms, and monetization models have altered the speed and nature of fame. Whereas public visibility and reputation were once tightly coupled, they can now be decoupled in the new media attention economy. The pursuit of online visibility brings both high rewards and steep risks to people trying to make a living from it, and it is an important dynamic of labor control in the age of platform capitalism.

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This is evident among people who aim to “go viral” on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. Virality is often discussed as an issue of circulation; when something “goes viral” on the internet, it spreads to many users in a short time (Nahon and Hemsley 2013). In our research, we approach virality as labor and examine the work of getting internet famous. When viewed as labor, a tension emerges: success online is defined as maximal visibility, known as the “visibility mandate,” but visibility comes with steep risks (Duffy and Hund 2019).

Platforms convey visibility, and hence success, in metrics such as numbers of followers, views, likes, and comments. Metrics can make work feel like a fun game and become addictive for platform workers (Petre 2021). Content creators, people who seek to earn money from their social media postings, have been described as “obsessing” over their metrics (Christin and Lewis 2021).

While it can be extremely pleasurable, there are also considerable risks of hyper-visibility on the internet, such as harassment and the problem of *context collapse*, when the distinct social contexts of offline interactions get merged into a single online space, leading to challenges in managing one’s identity (Marwick and boyd 2011). Context collapse can feel destabilizing, provoke anxiety, and invite unwanted criticism (Baldor 2022; boyd 2014). Therapists even specialize in treating people who have experienced the quick arrival of digital fame (Raeburn 2020).

As more and more “regular people” are experiencing public visibility on social media platforms (Marwick 2015), we aim to theorize the risks and rewards of getting—and, crucially, staying—internet famous. In contrast to traditional reputation-based fame, which has more stable and long-term value, internet fame rests on precarious and fickle short-term attention, thus requiring incessant work to maintain. This new experience of online attention is an important and undertheorized dynamic in platform capitalism. Platforms thrive on user data, engagement, and visibility metrics. To remain competitive, they need creators to constantly post new and engaging content, in order to keep users engaged. Getting people to pursue high visibility is necessary for platforms to harness human attention into profit.

To examine the contradictions of high visibility, this paper marshals 18-months of ethnographic data from working inside a “content farm,” a company of viral content creators. In addition, we draw from 60 interviews with mostly full-time creators whose goal is to make viral content, and a supplemental analysis of Reddit threads about people’s viral experiences. We first review existing research on fame, gamification, and affect. After a discussion of our methods, we outline a phenomenology of virality in three steps. First, platforms give creators a suite of performance metrics which afford emotional and physical sensations such as excitement, shock, and sleeplessness. Second, creators collectively interpret the potentially destabilizing effects of virality as positive signs of their success via shared practices we identify as *upward comparisons*, *critique discrediting*, and *re-enchantment practices*. Third, creators feel compelled, even addicted, to keep posting in pursuit of the viral high, despite its potential adverse effects. We conclude with implications from these findings for a critical sociology of the new attention economy.

THE NEW FAME GAME: FROM REPUTATION ECONOMY TO ATTENTION ECONOMY

In sociology, fame describes a state of being known to many others (Brim 2009; Ferris 2007). Famous people may lack actual talents or accomplishments, but for whatever their merits, they have social recognition (Rojek 2012). In previous understandings of fame, visibility and reputation were tightly coupled. Fame is a reputation economy: celebrities are both seen *and* known.

Reputation is the accumulation of social recognition, and it can be a valuable symbolic capital convertible to other gains, for instance, in marketing and politics (Bourdieu 1986). In fact, due to their reputations, celebrities could attract and direct people’s attention (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2015), thus generating profits first in the form of performances such as ticket and record sales, and, eventually, in brand endorsements (Gamson 1994).

Pathways to fame in the 20th century usually began with a person’s achievements or actions, which were disseminated through media channels controlled by gatekeepers, such as booking agents or Hollywood producers. As new technologies of measurement evolved, gatekeepers could better “see” audiences and measure their tastes, and these evolved into celebrity and performance metrics such as

Nielsen ratings and Q-scores, which track likeability and name recognition for advertisers (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2015).

The fame game has changed in the social media age (Marshall 2004; Senft 2013). Platforms allow “regular people” without talent or gatekeepers to attract mass audiences which were previously limited to broadcast media. Today, anyone with a YouTube or TikTok account can “blow up” overnight (Marwick 2015). Monetization now comes from platform revenue models such as adshare programs, which reward creators for their view counts and click rates, in addition to brand sponsorships, merchandise sales, and subscriptions and crowdfunding models that appeal directly to audiences for financial support. The temporality of fame has quickened online; the sheer speed with which things circulate on social media means that many people can “go viral” and capture public attention as quickly as they fade into obscurity (Nahon and Hemsley 2013). Viral fame can be especially fleeting, aided by engagement-based ranking algorithms that amplify one story after the next in an incessant effort to keep users engaged (Hagey and Horwitz 2021). We argue that what is unique about internet fame is that visibility and reputation can be decoupled: people can achieve massive attention online without gaining a reputation. How do people experience this new online fame game?

Gamification and Metrics at Work

Online fame is measured in metrics, the numeric representations of performance outcomes such as popularity. Like all numbers, metrics are reactive, shaping how people make sense of themselves (Espeland and Sauder 2016). While metrics are not new, they have a long history in advertising and politics, the refinement and accessibility of metrics has changed drastically in recent years. Any social media user now has access to fine-grained and real-time data about their performance (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2015).

Metrics can change people’s experience of work to feel more like a game. Gamification happens when game-like features come to define activities not previously thought of as games, from factory work (Burawoy 1982) to public speech on Twitter (X), which can feel like a game of scoring retweets (Nguyen 2021). Gamified metrics have been found to incentivize commitment among Uber drivers and food couriers, among others (Cameron 2022; Doorn and Chen 2021). Unlike past systems of labor control, algorithmic control uses gamified metrics to make work “fun,” illustrative of increasingly blurred lines between work and leisure (Deterding et al. 2011). Part of what makes games fun is spontaneous chance and competition (Cailliois and Halperin 1955). For instance, one Uber driver described getting rides as “micro dopamine hits,” which are well understood in the gaming and gambling industries (Munn 2017:10). Studying journalists, Petre found that staffers at Gawker preferred to be managed by metrics; whereas human bosses felt like managerial control, metrics felt like playing a game, and a highly addictive one at that (2021:18).

Affect Theory and Emotional Highs

Metrics also *feel* emotionally powerful, and their power is dependent on social processes of constructing affect (Kennedy and Hill 2018). Affect is the capacity of bodies to sense and feel one another. Affect theory proposes that the collective circulation of emotions across bodies and spaces creates social effects (Ahmed 2004), and that this is a central part of work in late capitalism (Negri and Hardt 1999). When programmers code algorithms to promote certain types of content, they are producing emotional states that transmit across bodies, with the goal of producing profit for advertisers (Underman 2020:16). Online communities can become “affective publics,” quickly channeling emotions between people who may be spread far apart, but are mutually focused through their screens (Papacharissi 2015).

Sociologists of culture have long considered how social groups co-produce emotional energy (Benzecry and Collins. 2014). Opera fans in Benzecry’s ethnography get “obsessed” and “lose themselves” in the show (2011). Emotional energy, which Collins (2004) developed to describe bodily and emotional arousal during social experiences, creates a sense of collective effervescence, where individuals feel connected to one another (Durkheim 1912 [1965]). This often takes work to accomplish; as Fine and Corte (2017) note, “fun” is a group achievement. Under the right social circumstances, even dangerous activities can become thrilling, writes Ugo Corte about big wave surfing (2022). Marijuana users likewise go through a learning process before they can enjoy the drug; they

learn to reinterpret potentially destabilizing sensations as enjoyable ones (Becker 1953). Because emotional highs ebb and flow, excitement itself has an “experiential career,” from an initial high to routinization, and re-enchantment (Tavory and Winchester 2012).

Technology further mediates workers’ affect, affording what Siciliano calls “aesthetic enrollment” into work (2022). YouTube data analysts, for instance, “lose themselves” in “wormholes” of internet content, and sound engineers “disappear” into the synthesizers at their workplace (Siciliano 2022). Bodies can even link to metrics to create “the quantified self,” like with Fitbits and wearable devices that get people to monitor themselves (Lupton 2016).

These studies provide a conceptual roadmap to analyze how digital workplaces afford affective highs, aided by technological design.

The Thrills and Dangers of Virality

People who go viral on social media describe it as having both emotional highs and lows. The thrill of “blowing up” online has been documented among, for instance, YouTube drillers (Stuart 2020) and drama creators (Christin and Lewis 2021), camgirls (Senft 2013), and “micro-celebrities,” those who have niche audiences (Abidin 2015). Popular accounts echo these sentiments, such as Ben Smith, the former editor of *BuzzFeed*, who described going viral: “The rush of affirmation can be giddy, and addictive. And if you have little else to hold on to, you can lose yourself to it” (Smith 2021).

As Smith’s comments suggest, virality can become a compulsion. Just as the goal for the gambling industry is to keep players playing, the goal for social media platforms is to keep users on their sites, which they can do by delivering positive rewards like thrills and dopamine rushes (Nyguen 2021). Anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll has drawn parallels between machine gambling and social media use (in Nguyen 2021; Schüll 2012). Everyday Instagram users even refer to their use of the app as a “drug habit” (Boy and Uitermark 2024:41). Research suggests a neurological basis for why social media attention feels good: when teenagers viewed Instagram from inside an fMRI machine, posts with more likes had greater brain activity associated with rewards (in Bail 2021:52). It is striking that the term “user” is associated mainly with consumers of drugs and the internet (Turkle 2011:30).

Going viral also comes with the significant risks of context collapse, which is the loss of control over one’s presentation of self. Social media collapses multiple audiences into a single context, making it difficult for people to know who their audience is, and what meanings they form about their online performances (Baldor 2022; Marwick and boyd 2011). Numerous studies of content creators document the destabilizing effects of not having control over one’s image or sense of self (Duffy and Hund 2015), and offending offline audiences (Stegeman, Are, and Poell 2024; Stuart 2020). Our study examines how virality can be both destabilizing and pleasurable.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

The Case

From December 2020–July 2022, with follow-up field visits in 2024 and 2025, the first author, Ashley Mears, conducted an ethnography of a social media content publishing company, “Magic Media Productions” (a pseudonym). At the time, Magic Media managed over 120 monetized Facebook pages and SnapChat channels with roughly 150 independent contractors creating content for their individual pages. The company shares skills and resources in exchange for a commission from each page’s earnings, akin to a multi-channel network. Based in the American West Coast, Magic Media also offers data analytics, props, and work spaces including a “collab” (collaboration) house. Companies like this are sometimes called “content farms” or “mills” because they produce a lot of content quickly. Magic Media’s mainstay are short, scripted videos, ranging in length from 3–20 minutes, such as pranks, cooking and crafting hacks, magic tricks, and scripted dramas.

The company aims to go viral primarily on Facebook. Their goal is to make a “banger” video, with tens of millions of views. Facebook is the world’s largest social media platform with over 3 billion monthly active users as of 2025. Facebook launched its Watch feature in 2018 to promote video content, and its algorithms boost the visibility of popular videos in users’ News Feeds. Two features of Facebook are important regarding virality.

First, its videos can attain high reach in the hundreds of millions of views. The Facebook News Feed underwent a redesign in 2009 inspired by Twitter's real-time content circulation. FB's own data scientists described the redesign in epidemiological terms such as "viral contagion" to describe how fast content could reach mass audiences (Sun et al. 2009). Unlike YouTube which is search-based—users search specific terms to plug into niche communities—Facebook content can more easily go viral, and this by design, to keep users engaged.

Second, viral videos generate high profits. Facebook makes money as ads roll over content, yielding over \$100 billion in revenue in 2023. Facebook gives creators 55 percent of the revenue generated per thousand ad impressions, known as "CPM" (cost per mille). The CPM rate might be as high as \$40 per 1,000 viewers, if the video's audience is "high value" (i.e., North American). The CPM drops the further a video travels from rich countries: advertisers pay as little as \$2 per 1,000 viewers in the Philippines, a pricing system used across the global advertising market.

The viral creators in this study focused primarily on Facebook, rather than TikTok or other platforms, because of FB's high rates of pay. As such, their experiences are shaped by the specific affordances of Facebook, particularly its speed. Because of the revenue share program, both Facebook and its creators have an interest in the quick accumulation of massive views. In fact, leaked documents from the company in October 2021 revealed that Facebook *could* slow down the speed of viral content, for example, to stem the flow of misinformation, but it has not done so out of financial interests (Hagey and Horwitz 2021). Virality is lucrative.

The 120 pages at Magic Media collectively earned about \$5 million and between 5–7 billion views monthly. Creators' median monthly earnings were \$30,000 per page in mid-2021; six percent of its pages earned more than \$200,000 a month; 94 percent of its pages earned over \$5,000 a month. Clearly outliers, this sample examines the "winners" in the winner-take-all creator economy, which has few highly paid creators at the top of a steep pyramid (Jin 2020). This study provides rare insights into elite creators for whom virality is a regular occurrence and whose experiences shed light on the dynamics of online fame.

Participant Observation

This research combined digital and in-person ethnography with interviews. Upon agreeing to the terms of the study, Magic Media added Mears to their private Facebook group for digital observations, which included over a dozen hours of training videos on how to make viral videos. Mears logged in at least twice daily and kept systematic notes on their online discussions.

Next, Magic Media set up a monetized Facebook page for Mears to begin to make and upload her own videos, so that she could learn from immersion. She filmed, acted in, edited, and uploaded over a dozen videos to her own page, and studied her performance metrics. Like most of the creators she studied, Mears used an alias for her page name to avoid permanent association with content that could be reputationally damaging, such as cheater dramas and pranks. She conducted in-person observations of their work in the West Coast city on six field trips between March 2021 and August 2024 lasting between 5–10 days for each trip, including during "Meet Up" events with 60-plus creators filming together in small teams. She stayed in their collab house and spent days filming videos with them, acting in their videos, driving to Wal-Mart for prop runs, and sitting beside them as they studied their laptops. Mears attended several of their house parties, in addition to their frequent nightly hang-outs, during which they discussed the work of going viral.

Interviews

Mears also interviewed 60 viral creators, 53 of whom work with Magic Media; the other seven worked at competitor companies based in the United States (n=1), Mexico (n=2), India (n=3), and Cypress (n=1). Interviews across the sample converged around similar thematic findings. These semi-structured interviews lasted 1–2 hours. Most were on Zoom, and several were conducted in person during the fieldwork. She interviewed a subset of ten creators multiple times over the research period. She also filmed videos with 25 creators in the interview sample, triangulating her observations with their narrative accounts.

About 70 percent of the sample had worked previously in entertainment as magicians, singers, filmmakers, and dancers ($n=43$). They are 37 men and 23 women, predominantly white ($n=50$), and their median age is 30. Out of the 60, 48 of them did this job full time as their main source of income at the time of the interview.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed using AI software. To analyze field notes, Mears first transferred her iPhone jottings into Word documents, where she highlighted salient text. She then began to organize emergent themes into analytic memos. After 11 months of data collection, at which point there were 50 interviews and several analytic memos grouped by key themes, interview transcripts were entered into NVivo software to begin to verify themes' significance. Addiction was a key theme throughout the research, and by the end of the interviews, the second author, Taylor Beauvais, joined the project to recode the data specifically on participants' experiences with addiction. With these codes, we returned to sociology and STS literatures on work, affect, and social media. All names of viral creators and companies have been changed to protect their privacy.

Finally, we questioned the broader salience of the emergent findings from our ethnographic case by examining online narratives about virality. Beauvais searched popular forums Reddit and Discord with search variations on "what is it like going viral?" This yielded dozens of threads discussing the experience, among which we identified four Reddit and Discord communities with over 50K members that focused on our topic: NewTubers (315k members), creatorsAdvice (62k members), Youtubers (231k members), and TikTokHelp (55k members). Beauvais sorted their most popular discussion posts, comments and discussions about managing visibility, and coded for themes around the sensations of virality, advice, and strategies for coping with it. We use these supplemental data to support the ethnographic findings and to confirm that our findings are consistent with the experiences of other viral creators.

FINDINGS

Part 1: Shock and Awe: How Platforms Afford Emotional Highs

Virality as a job. Going viral takes strategic disciplined labor, contrary to the popular imagination of viral memes as happening organically (Shifman 2014). Viewers have endless choices of content, and the creator's job is to "hook" viewers' attention, to "stop their scroll," as some put it. Creators therefore make maximally engaging content with clear and compelling openings, carefully staged images, with bright colors, titillating scenarios, and easy-to-understand plotlines, such as a cleavage-bearing bridezilla ruining the wedding, or a husband caught in bed cheating by his angry wife (all scripted).

Content creators describe their work as a job, and a demanding one. The most successful ones work 10+ hours a day to film between 4–8 videos, post at least one video per day, respond to comments, file copyright violations, and run data tests on their content. When filming with them in the West Coast City, Mears spent packed days from 9 a.m.–7 p.m. doing a range of tasks from production, filming, acting, editing, prop shopping, data analytics, and prepping for the next day. As it turns out, the platform steers and incentivizes creators into this labor. Below, we describe virality's technologically-afforded affects, which compel creators to work harder and longer than they expected prior to beginning this work.

Virality as an emotional experience. Creators tell remarkably consistent accounts of what it feels like to go viral. Almost all creators have a "first time" story recounting their initial experience. These stories feature anxiety and bodily stress. They use phrases like "confusing," "hard to get your head around," and "not real" to describe seeing high metrics. For instance, Avery, a singer and songwriter based in Nashville, got 19 million views on her first viral video. Though it did not pay much money at the time, the rush of views amazed her:

I'll never forget it. I thought the internet was broken! Because I couldn't even, I couldn't fathom that.... It was just wild. I just couldn't refresh *fast* enough. Every time I refreshed, there were thousands and thousands of new comments.

Creators keep the Facebook Creator Studio open constantly; this is the platform's portal to a dashboard suite of performance metrics. The Creator Studio simplifies how creators understand their success with clear and commensurate indicators, bright colors, and emotionally evocative numbers which track how frequently users click, view, and engage with their content. Such designs employ "dark patterns" of tech which exploit vulnerabilities in human attention (Cara 2019). Creator Studio also provides line and pie charts and tables to convey numbers of views, likes, emojis, followers, average time watched, and comments. Rendered into concrete data points, audience tastes become visible like never before (Mejias and Couldry 2019). They look like scores on a game.

Further, when a video went viral, Facebook showed the number of live viewers in the upper left-hand corner of the screen: like a ticker tape counting the number of people currently watching, or a scoreboard tracking popularity. Every creator described following their view count closely, tracking its movements up or down, and they reported their state of amazement, akin to hitting the jackpot in lottery play, when it reaches new peaks. For instance, Alex, a 27-year-old former magician's assistant, had a video that reached 160,000 live viewers, and she said:

I'm bad at numbers anyway, but I just can't fathom 160,000 people, and they all leave and a new set comes in.... I just can't fathom it. You can't comprehend what that means.... It all seems like a dream for me, like I'm about to wake up.

These metrics can feel overwhelming. Most of the views and money are made in a video's first thirty days of posting, after which its views tend to slow down, though residual payments still come from older videos each month. The speed with which videos "pop off," as they say, leaves many in shock. Olga, a former fitness trainer, explains:

Yeah. It was, mind-blowingly like, you would check the numbers daily and you're like, I cannot, I can't even describe it. Like you can't—I just can't believe it. Like, I literally, I'm in shock. I was in shock daily by the numbers. Um, yeah, but it feels really, really good.

The sudden confrontation with huge audiences overnight is transformative. For instance, Henry, 27, who had been posting jokes and magic tricks on YouTube since he was a teenager, described his first banger video as affirming his self-image and re-orienting his goals:

It got 36,000 views overnight. And my little brain was wondering, "How I can make that happen again?" Now I didn't get any money, at that time. But I was like, "Oh my God, like, if I can get this many views, then the world would know I am funny."

Henry didn't make any money on his first viral videos, but he felt an intoxicating thrill of being seen by so many people.

Those thrills are certainly amplified by money, and, in particular, by the specific ways that platforms distribute money. Like view counts, money is tallied on screens which creators constantly refresh. Most creators in this sample had experienced watching a single video yield sums ranging from \$10,000–\$100,000. Financial success of this scale was new for almost every creator in the company. Several viral creators reported making more in one month than they had earned before in a year. "This doesn't happen to many people, to make more money than neurosurgeons," said Alex, herself a community college dropout.

Creators showed strong emotional and even physical reactions during interviews on Zoom when describing their high view counts and earnings. Some laughed uncontrollably, some shouted, and many cried. Kim, 28, previously earned \$25,000 a year as a public-school teacher in Minnesota, a job she loved but quit after one month into making Facebook videos full-time with her friend. Now her monthly income is between five and ten times what she used to make for a whole year—details she disclosed in a fit of laughter, as if she herself could not believe it.

Creators frequently narrated their experience of virality at a fast pace. The cadence of their voices quickened as they described the numbers moving upward, as if reliving the feeling. For instance, Julian, a British creator based in Mexico, used to be "famous" he said dryly in scare quotes for his

magic tricks on YouTube prior to making viral videos on Facebook. He narrated his first time going viral in terms of rising dollar amounts:

I mean, Jesus, I mean— [pauses] I remember the Creator Studio was going up, and it was like alright, \$1,000 [snaps his fingers] \$2,000 [snap] \$30,000 [snap] 31,000, 32,000. And it was going up by ten thousand an hour. It was going up. [he laughs] It was *going up!* And we was like “OHMYGOD, we’re rich! [he shouts] *We’re rich! We’re rich! This is it! We’ve done it!*”

Creators’ accounts have parallels with the biophysical markers of gambling, with distinct embodied sensations of spiked endorphins, compulsively returning to their screens, and experiencing feelings of euphoria (Schüll 2012). Emotional excitement runs so high that some people report not being able to sleep when they go viral. Said Lynn and Coby, who make content together with their family: “We were just watching the numbers come in with our jaws dropped. I mean we couldn’t sleep, I mean it is *amazing*.” Trish, formerly a musician, took a selfie when she first went viral: “So I actually have a picture of myself on the plane crying, like happy tears, like freaking out.”

Because virality brings immediate financial rewards, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of money and views, because the platform conveys both sets of information via metrics which can scale up high and fast, as Julian put it, “It was *going up!*” Only two creators in our interviews were explicit that their excitement stemmed *only* from money, and *rather than* views. Such as Chris who explained:

When our video was going viral [130 million views], I thought, “Oh, cool, this might make us a lot of money”... I think they did a study where, like neurologically, money and cocaine had the same effects in your brain, you know? I’ve seen that in a lot of the people in this company, they get addicted to the money, ‘cause it’s a *high*. It’s a really big high. So for me, it was awesome, because this might make a lot of money, but it wasn’t like, “Oh, great, I’m an influencer and hundreds of millions of people have seen my face.” Nah, I don’t care about that.

Chris is rather exceptional, because most creators talked about views and money as intertwined. We also observed that some bangers have such low CPMs that they do not yield much profit. Regardless, creators still experience them as thrilling because of their high views. In fact, five content creators explicitly stated that they experienced excitement from view counts alone, even if the videos did not yield high pay-outs. The rush of visibility metrics alone could feel like winning a slot machine.

The thrilling experiences of these gamified metrics—both the views and the money—make virality a powerful experience, but one that is distinct from traditional celebrity. Only a few content creators, like Avery and Henry, sought traditional fame as reputation: Avery wants to be known as a musician and entertainer, and Henry wants the world to know that he is funny. As they seek renown among digital publics, Avery and Henry are similar to other “influencers” and “micro celebrities” which previous scholars have described (e.g., Abidin 2015; Duffy 2017). But by far, the majority of creators at this company were uninterested in their personal reputation and its convertibility into other fields (Bourdieu 1986). Instead, they sought the short-term thrills and immediate financial gain of visibility decoupled from reputation. Recall that most of the creators in this study did not even put their full names on their pages. By *not* seeking public recognition, viral creators appear distinct from most studies of social media influencers (Mears 2023).

Money is culturally intelligible—a clear measure of success—but other metrics require interpretive work to make sense of and to enjoy. This work is especially evident with how creators make sense of viewers’ comments.

Part 2: Learning to Like the Likes—and the Hate

Online hate, mean comments, and context collapse. Virality is potentially unsettling, especially when creators see that it brings a large volume of negative comments and emotions, stemming from context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2011). Many creators were cognizant of the context collapse problem; for instance Kim, who was single and dating, was wary of negative impressions her potential future boyfriend (and his family) might have about her based on her “gross” cooking videos. Jude, similarly, was frustrated that his conservative Christian family formed negative opinions of his lifestyle from a few of his videos in which women wore bikinis.

Beyond bringing potential critique from people within their personal lives, the videos invited an abundance of “mean comments” from strangers. For instance, Miles, a comedian and stage performer, felt hurt when he received an onslaught of negative comments on his videos:

I’ve made the mistake of reading the comments. I was like, “Oh my God, people think I’m on all these drugs.” And I got really bothered because I was like, “No, I’m just trying to entertain and be funny.” And then these comments are just kind of brutal.

When the author began this ethnography, the head of the company, Ryan, prepared her to expect “mean comments,” on her page and in Messenger, which would range from critiques of the content (“This video was so fake”) to personal insults and threats. Ryan himself estimates that over ten years of going viral, he has received more than 100,000 death threats, and 100,000–1M wishes for his death, in the form of “I hope you die” and “I hope you get cancer,” etc.

Most internet users experience some negative interactions, such as racist and sexist discourses, in online spaces (Ortiz 2023). Mean comments are an acute problem for viral content creators for two reasons. First, the scale of virality invites engagement from millions of people, sometimes hundreds of millions, which can yield thousands of comments on their videos. Second, Facebook’s engagement-based ranking algorithms weigh emojis more heavily than the “Like” button (Hagey and Jeff Horwitz 2021). The platform’s current palette of emojis captures six feelings: love, care, haha, wow, sad, angry. Because human psychology heightens attention to strong feelings, content that elicits outrage tends to outperform that which inspires care or likes (Berger and Milkman 2012). Since mean comments get more reactions, they rise algorithmically to the top of the comments section to be most visible on the creator’s page.

We observed other creators on Reddit also struggling with harsh or negative comments in their online discussions. In the Reddit community *r/creator*, a community for verified YouTubers, a YouTuber named “NuSensei” (198k followers, 35+million views) shared this advice: “prepare to have every single thing about you to be ripped apart,” “don’t read the comments,” “turn off your notifications and step away from your computer.”

Faced with mean comments and context collapse, we observed viral creators collectively trying to reinterpret virality as a pleasurable sense of achievement in its own right. Like Becker’s analysis of how marijuana users learn to appreciate the high of the drug (1953), we considered the interactional processes that steer creators into experiencing pleasure in virality. Below we describe three main processes: 1) upward comparisons, 2) critique discrediting, and 3) re-enchantment.

Upward Comparisons

Upward comparison is when one compares oneself to status superiors favorably. In this case, creators drew comparisons between their reach to that of celebrities who command big audiences. When describing live viewers, they compare their audience to in-person shows: a Rolling Stones concert, a Taylor Swift show, a Beyoncé video. For example, Kim and Jane, who film together for their shared page:

Kim: I remember laying in my bed and seeing that we had like 40,000 live viewers on our video and being like, “Oh my gosh, thousands of people are watching our faces right now”.... There’s a Rolling Stones concert watching your video. When you put it in terms like that, it’s *literally* insane.

Jane: It does help to use concert perspectives. Like, “Oh my gosh, a Taylor Swift concert is watching my face right now.” It’s like really hard to comprehend that so many humans are staring at you.

Kim: When you do quantify it though, it’s crazy.... Like just this one video, more people have watched that than saw The Rolling Stones play in the *entire* decade of the eighties. *Which is insane!*

Kim and Jane here are “anchoring” virality to events in real life; that is, they integrate this strange new experience into an existing framework to better comprehend it (Moscovici 1984). These accounts invoke Durkheim’s writings on collective effervescence, the heightened emotional state that people feel when they come together in a group and participate in shared rituals, ceremonies, or events ([1912] 1965). Yet instead of feeling that energy from physical co-presence with a crowd, creators feel it as they sit alone and watch counts of live viewers on their laptop and smartphone screens.

Performers especially drew parallels to the thrills of being on stage to explain the rush of virality, as Quentin explains:

It's instant gratification... I think this is more rewarding than doing a live show a lot of the time. And, you *are* doing a live show in a sense. I mean, there is a little number in that upper lefthand corner of the screen when a video is taking off and they tell you how many people are watching it live, *right now*. And when you've got a good video and you see that you've got 50–70,000 people watching it, *right now*. I mean, *that's crazy!* That's selling out Madison Square Gardens, what, *three times?*

Upward comparisons help creators' sense of the metrics and allow them to envision themselves on par with celebrities. Said Jude, who had one of the world's most watched YouTube pages from repackaging his Facebook videos: "I'm the most viewed artist in the world, even more than Banksy." Six months later, he said, "I'm 100 million views behind Mr. Beast," YouTube's top influencer at the time.

These are all favorable comparisons to public figures with strong positive reputations. Viral creators are not, for instance, imagining themselves as maligned figures who get booed on the stage. Rather, they draw comparisons between themselves and beloved culture icons such as Taylor Swift.

They also compared their audience size to other well-known events, such as the Super Bowl, Madison Square Gardens, and the Oscars. Jenni situated the scale of her audience relative to the size of the U.S. population:

I even received an award from Facebook for one, for being in the top 10 most viewed videos. And I believe that video has, like, 360 million views right now, probably even more... that's, that's more than the population of the United States!

Upward comparisons to celebrities, famous events, and geographies further enabled creators to minimize critique, because they could situate mean comments within the context of fame and its detractions. All celebrities attract vocal "haters," explained Jude, who observed his friends at a Grammys viewing party:

[they] were talking such shit about the celebrities on that screen. It sounded like the [Facebook] comments section. But they loved it! They actually *love* the celebrities on the screen, even though they were talking shit about Cardi B's shoes or whatever. So that is just human nature.

Though these comparisons sound like boasting, we interpret them to be collective strategies of sense-making of the experience of hyper-visibility, and a way of elevating their social worth.

Upward comparisons have another effect: they incentivize more and harder work. In addition to comparing to themselves to celebrities, creators are constantly comparing to one another, and against their own past performances. Creator Studio displays their performance metrics alongside competitors and their own recent performances. This compels constant comparison of oneself to the far-right tail of success, because creators assess their worth against high performers, including their own best prior successes. Upon opening the Creator Studio, on the top bar is a set of numbers and arrows, a scored percentage indicating how the creator is doing compared to how she was doing over the average of the prior week. If she is performing better than last week, her scores are in green accompanied by a green arrow pointing up; if she is performing worse, they are in red with red arrows pointing downward. By comparing to her best past self, the creator must be constantly improving, or she risks being "in the red." Said Hana:

With so many high-level performers around us we are stuck in a bubble of successful people. Okay we have half a billion views in total, that's good. But Avery pulls in 100 million a week!

All numbers are comparative and hence competitive; they reduce qualitative questions, such as "Is this good or bad content?" into quantitative ones: "Am I scoring more or less than someone else?" (Espeland and Sauder 2016). The result is a structured experience of anxiety where creators are constantly at risk of losing a game predicated on forever growth, even, and perhaps especially, for those who have already achieved stunning success.

Critique Discrediting

Viral creators often talk about the mean comments among themselves, trying to make sense of them. It seemed like a spontaneous topic of conversation at their parties, hang-outs, and while filming. Beyond framing critique as a by-product of fame, viral creators collectively form strategies to discredit their detractors, which we term *critique discrediting*.

First, these creators frame mean comments as the outcome of the platform algorithms. Creators assured themselves and each other that mean comments are simply more visible on the platform, not necessarily a reflection of most viewers' feelings. Explained Quentin:

The people that don't like it are louder. And those types of comments rise to the top because people are reacting to them. If somebody writes "Cool"... nobody reacts to it. But if somebody says "Your magic is cancer and you should die," maybe somebody is going to react. Maybe somebody might put an angry face on it or a sad face, or a happy face or a laughing face, but whatever they do, that comment is going to rise to the top.

Relatedly, and like other digital laborers, creators interpret performance metrics in ways that affirm their identities, akin to the way that journalists reinterpret poor click rates as signs of their high editorial standards (Christin and Petre 2020). Viral creators form consensus that other metrics, *rather than* the mean comments, are better indicators of their content's quality. For instance, they explained adamantly that share counts are more important than comments, reasoning that when someone shares a video, this means the video is of good quality, even if it received a lot of negative comments. Thus, they dismiss qualitative comments as meaningless, while elevating ambiguous quantitative measures such as share counts.

Second, viral creators tend to discredit their critics, whom they frame as "keyboard warriors" and "trolls" not worth listening to, said Tim:

We don't read them... I've learned to stop reading them because you know cyber bullies, they're trolls. A lot of them do this just for fun. They can just say whatever they want.

Hence, they frame "haters" online as a side effect of the internet, which enables strangers the freedom to express hostility when they are otherwise polite in person (Bail 2021). For example, creators talk often about how nice and supportive their fans are when they greet them in public. While they are not often recognized offline, when it does happen, it is a happy occasion: "I love your videos," once said a flight attendant to Jude and Margo. Such experiences lead them to conclude that in real life, people are kinder than they are online.

Having framed critique this way, they can dismiss comments by ignoring them all together: "A lot of the comments are negative and you just don't read them" (said creator Joe). Women creators often dismissed their haters as sexist, since women in particular received pointed critiques about their appearances. Some creators even screen out negative comments, by setting up word filters on their page against profanities and key words ("fat," "ugly," "suck," "hate," etc.). For instance, said Elsa: "So there's been a lot of very harsh comments, but I don't let it bother me. I have my filters, so I can't even see them. Certain words like you just enter whatever words you want filtered and then it won't even show up. It just goes hidden."

Finally, viral creators interpret negative comments as positive indicators of success because viral creators welcome *all* comments and reactions — praise and critique alike. Jude likes to say, "You're not making money until the mean comments come in." Similarly, Avery:

Because even if they sit there and watch the whole video and say, 'hate this, it's terrible,' well, that's the perfect viewer right there because they've watched the whole video and they've engaged.

Some creators, such as Freddie, even laugh and share jokes with each other about mean comments: "Like the meaner the comment, the bigger I laugh. Like it's just, it's just funny to me.... The comments, they are absurd. I have lots of screenshots on my phone of ones that are just, like, creatively cruel. And it's just like, *man*." Hateful comments thus become a source of group pleasure and a basis for group humor.

In sum, creators are able to re-contextualize and transform this negative outcome of virality into positive signs of their success. This is a paradoxical outcome, and it reveals a deeper logic of digital fame: high visibility, untethered from personal reputation, is what matters to them.

Re-enchantment

Existing literature would predict that virality, like other thrills, will soon become routine, lose its power, and release its grip on creators (Tavory and Winchester 2012). Both the company and the platform make substantial efforts to continually re-enchant virality with emotional energy. Creators' attachment to virality is not just a personal attachment—it is also an outcome of workplace organization.

To incentivize their workers, Magic Media collectively marked and celebrated virality. Fellow creators talk about one another's successes, and they announce and cheer when they are together to see live views climbing up. The head of the company, Ryan, called creators to congratulate each banger. Mears herself received his call the day her banger took off (190 million views), which was preceded by a series of Ryan's hurried Facebook direct messages to her narrating the quick upward trajectory of her video, akin to how creators told their stories of virality in interviews.

Furthermore, Ryan gave creators trophies when their videos surpass benchmarks such as 100 million views, further invoking upward comparisons. Several creators displayed these with pride on their living room walls and on their fireplace mantels. Facebook, like YouTube, also gives awards to top-performing creators when they hit benchmarks such as one million subscribers. High performing creators get additional perks within the company. Creators that surpass benchmarks like earning \$80,000 in one month get to go on company "reward trips," all-expenses paid vacations, to places such as Disney World and the Bahamas. In the collab house liquor cabinet, the top shelf of expensive bottles had this notice, "Please only take from this shelf if your last month was 100K."

The frequency and consistency with which creators employed strategies of critique discrediting, upward comparisons, and re-enchantment suggests that they are coordinating among themselves to arrive at shared processes of meaning-making. Indeed, Mears consistently observed these discourses at their hangouts, which were frequent as many creators live within a 15-minute drive of each other and hang out regularly at each other's houses to share meals, drinks, and play video games. Many are romantically involved with a fellow creator (20 out of the 60 interviewees). Social ties can buffer feelings of failure, as ethnographies of artistic communities have shown (Reilly 2018), and this community helps them sustain the perception that going viral is good. Given their social embeddedness, combined with the sense that their work is a game which they play by choice, these workers are primed to develop a strong commitment to the work (Aldrich 2020), which became time- and life-consuming.

Part 3: Gamification and Addiction

Social media is often described by scholars and journalists as "addictive" with platforms "hijacking" our attention (Alter 2017; Cara 2019). Psychologists dispute whether social media meet the criteria of addiction, or if they are just habit forming and prone to "problematic use" (Panova and Carbonell 2018). We found that creators also invoked addiction and related terms to describe their pursuit of virality, which could give rise to problematic habits.

For instance, in an interview on Zoom with Timmy and Tiffany, a couple whose video had gone viral the night before, shared their excitement:

Tiffany: I think it's like a gambling addiction. It's like you go to sleep thinking about it, you wake up in the morning thinking about it. It's a *true* addiction, like I couldn't even put it any other way.

Timmy: Well, yeah we wake up in the middle of the night, we check our live viewers.

Tiffany: I was up at four o'clock this morning because we have a video that just went really, really viral. There's 25,000 live viewers right now...

Timmy: (interrupting as he checks the screen)— it's at 16 million!

Tiffany: – hang on I have to go check it. 32,000 live viewers!

Timmy: Oh my God, it's got 32,000! [laughing]

Tiffany: Look, right there! [she points to the screen for him] You can't help it—

Timmy: — Oh my God, like the *dopamine*!

Tiffany: — the *rush*! [they are now both uncontrollably laughing] I'm sorry, you caught us at the right time. We're, like, really excited about it...

Timmy: It feels like a drug. There's no — and that's why people do so well with this—there's no replacement for it. When this video, when it starts to go down, now you're chasing that hit again.

Almost every creator used similar terms associated with the euphoria of drugs to describe virality: it's a high, an addiction, a rush, "you can't help it," "dopamine," "getting a hit," "endorphins," "crack," "cocaine," and "get your rocks off."

Physically, it can cause behaviors they see as problematic, such as not being able to put the phone down when their numbers are rising. In fact, when Alex first went viral, her boyfriend and fellow viral creator physically closed her laptop for her and told her, "Don't look at it." Jake, whose first viral banger had taken off earlier in the day when we met, was reaching for his phone in his jacket pocket incessantly while we chatted. Hilary described her co-creators as being addicted, and added, "It's like a casino, the rush and checking to see, is it going up?"

Chance Chance plays a significant role in these addictive tendencies. Even by following tried-and-true "formulas" for success, no video is ever guaranteed to go viral, and creators often wondered, why did this video "pop off," but that one failed?

Goffman described the importance of "chance," the thrilling pursuit of possible yet unknown outcomes, in socially exciting arenas like nightlife and casinos (1969). In studies of gaming, uncertainty of outcomes makes playing worthwhile (Geertz 1973). When it is clear who is going to win, fans leave the stadium (Cailliois and Halperin 1955). While viral creators use sophisticated data analytic tools to predict success, they can never predict virality perfectly, due to changing audience tastes and changes in the algorithms, both of which are always opaque. For example, Margo, who achieved spectacular success with a three-minute video in which she spins Cheetos in a salad spinner (200 million views) said:

There are a lot of factors that we don't know about and can't control like right time, right place. For some reason the collective consciousness of the world wanted that thing at that time. They were like "this is really interesting to us today," but tomorrow it won't be as interesting. I think there are random things that are like that, where we can't really predict. But my feeling is like, I have to do more of this.

Margo ties the uncertainty of Facebook's outcomes to her compulsion to keep trying, which parallels Schüll's analysis of machine gambling, where the uncertainty generated by slot machines' irregular "hit frequency" produces compulsive play (2012). Intermittent reinforcement, psychologists have found, is a powerful motivation, even more so than consistent rewards after each try (Deslauriers and Everett 1977), as noted in other studies of platformed gig workers, such as food couriers (Doorn and Chen 2021). For a content creator, every video is a potential hit, and that chance is what keeps them coming back to work, improvising new strategies to win, and even talking about their work as a game of chance. For example, Jude described Facebook as an "obstacle course" he must play to get his content to a mass audience. He must continually try new styles of videos, because the rules of the game (e.g., algorithms) are always changing. Ryan, the head of the company, explained:

[Facebook] always has new information that you want to see. For sure it's compelling to look at the numbers the way a slot machine is compelling... because the numbers don't always go up. You don't know if they're gonna go up or down. Every set of bad numbers is a new problem for me to solve: how do I get those numbers to go from red to green? It's compelling like a game.

Thus, while creators capture users' attention, Facebook captures the creator. Like the house of every casino, the platform stands to win.

The Fear of Fading As with other highs, when the initial rush fades, it can leave behind a sense of loss and anxiety about when or whether it will return. Lynn and her husband Coby had a successful

banger “right out of the gate”; it was the second video they had posted, and they had not had as much success in the seven months since, leading to a sense of disappointment:

And it's a, it's a double edged sword, you know, a blessing and a curse to have that kind of success, because you think, “Oh wow every video could be like this, and every month will be like this,” and it's not the case. Everything you do after that, if it doesn't reach that level it's just so very disappointing, so it's like a double edged thing.

In the virtual world Second Life, Boellstorff found that players invoked addiction to express their concern over their apparent loss of agency (2015:170); similarly, creators invoke addiction to describe the sense that they must *continually pursue* virality, driven by a sense of its potential loss. Many creators talked about their past successes with longing, such as when Kim complained about her page making only \$80,000 a month. In previous months, it had earned \$300,000.

Creators with consistent bangers were not immune to this anxiety. Even Margo, who was among the most consistent high earners in the company, felt a fear of losing her “lucky streak”:

If you're on a high, you wake up in the morning, you're like, “Oh my God, how many live viewers are there on it right now?” This is crazy! It's just a habit like you're, it's like you're a gambler on like a lucky streak or something and you're like how long is this going to last? This is amazing... and it is a little bit of an addiction, I mean when you keep getting all these hits you just want to looking at these numbers, and you just, it's a little bit of like, shock. And yeah, you just like want to do more of it... the next ones that come after that video never feel as good because they're not usually [as high].

The sense of loss when numbers inevitably go down compels creators to work harder and more often in pursuit of repeat success. For instance, in an interview, a creator named Joe:

Well, yeah, it's, it's incredibly intoxicating and exciting. Yeah. And then just like anything else you're like, okay, we got to get another one. How do we do this? Like, what should we do?... And then you ended up just hitting your head against the wall, trying to reach for the stars again.

Similarly, Alex, who had previously made six bangers by the time we met, hadn't had a hit video in over three months. It was her goal to get another banger, and she remarked with sad resignation that her happiness in life had become dependent on doing so.

Because viral creators pursue internet fame, which is fleeting and does not yield public reputation, their claims to success rest on a more precarious foundation than traditional celebrity. They can never “rest on their laurels,” because their rewards only come with the next viral hit. Masha explains:

... when the ball starts to slow down, that's when you start to get into panic mode of, “Oh my gosh, like I've been, I haven't been working as hard as I should.” Like I need to get the next hit because I need that number to be here.

As Masha, Joe, and Margo illustrate, the relentless pursuit of virality and its ever-higher metrics function as a form of labor control by platforms.

Given their constant sense of FOMO, fear of missing out, viral creators began to see their time in terms of the money they could be earning if they were filming, instead of doing anything else. As a result, several of them had not taken a day off from work for months. Many hired assistants or other staff to perform their everyday tasks of running a home, caring for family members, and cooking. Jude said:

It isn't that I'm too pretentious to do my own laundry. It's because, gosh, I'm paying *a lot* of money to do my own laundry, you know, if I could take that hour and do work and make \$4,000, essentially I'm paying \$4,000 to do my own laundry.... This is like, we don't know how long it's gonna last. We don't know what this is gonna be. This is what we have to do *right now*.

Mears experienced this personally one night just before going to bed, when instead of sleeping she ended up filming for two hours in her kitchen because she saw on the company's group chat that CPMs were high: "You've got to get in while the getting is good," exclaimed Ryan to his company, prompting her to film more.

Viral creators adopted a "gold rush" mentality: they quit their day jobs, paused their careers, and reoriented their goals to go "all in," as Ryan encouraged them to do. Said Avery, "You're sitting on a lottery ticket," in one company-wide motivational message. Given their impression of virality as both pleasurable and potentially fleeting, many creators reorganized their lives in pursuit of it.

Many creators also reported confusing the boundaries between work and life. As Trish said, it's hard to "turn it off," because every moment can be turned into a potential viral video. Three months into this fieldwork, Mears similarly noticed how she imagined filming videos in every room she entered, whether friends' houses, cafes, or classrooms. Creators have to deliberately demarcate work from personal and leisure time, and some even reported holding one another accountable to take time off.

These compulsions are not limited to the company we studied. In the Reddit community *r/TikTokHelp*, creator "Erynroughtabook" (300k followers, 3+million views) advises creators "post every day" in hopes of attaining more views. One popular post in a Reddit community (*r/ContentCreators*) captures this struggle, with a meme stating how they started content creation because they "didn't want a 9 to 5 job," and now they "work 24/7." TikTok creator "derrickstyled" (42.3k followers) shares his experience: "I literally wake up and I start editing."

As they become more successful in attaining digital fame, creators become more dependent on it. Somewhat surprisingly, even among the world's most high-performing content creators, we observed a heightened sense of anxiety and dependence upon the platform.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Fame has long been equated with personal renown. Even Plato believed that people pursue fame as a way to evade their own mortality, to leave "behind them a name which shall be eternal" (2008). In traditional media, being visible was linked to having a personal reputation. We show that social media platforms decouple visibility from reputation, leading to a new kind of publicness. In the social media attention economy, people may become hyper-visible for a fleeting amount of time and still remain unknown. Viral creators illustrate this transformation, from traditional fame as a reputation economy to internet fame in the new attention economy.

This paper has documented how digital laborers come to understand and value virality through experiences, emotional sensations, social interactions, and interactions with technology. Creators derive visceral pleasure from numbers, which make sense only in webs of interactions, in this case, in the company of fellow creators who are steered by the platform and who steer each other to enjoy the potentially destabilizing experience of high reach. Virality becomes a positive thrill, one too good to stop, despite the problems of context collapse and FOMO in their personal lives. The high of virality, in this analysis, becomes a social accomplishment, consistent with Becker's analysis of getting high on marijuana (1953).

How generalizable is our phenomenology of virality to other contexts? We hypothesize that the experiences outlined here are likely to exist even outside the support and direction of an organization like Magic Media. Our reading of online community forums on Reddit, popular press, and online sources for creator communities shows an array of people trying to make sense of the overwhelming feelings that hyper-visibility produces. We found abundant advice on Reddit communities that instruct people in how enjoy this kind of fame.

Future studies should compare the sense-making strategies of individuals who operate in isolation, or at least, with less social support than those who we studied. Other studies might compare niche creators such as "micro-celebrities" and influencers, who may be compelled to stay "on brand" for relatively smaller audiences and avoid virality all together (Senft 2013). For influencers, viral spread may pose steeper and different risks, and come with fewer sensations of elation or addiction.

Additionally, our case centered on Facebook creators, who were drawn to its high payments. Because different platforms afford different kinds of experiences, future research should explore what

kind of affects are produced and how they circulate via other platforms. On TikTok, for example, rates of pay are far lower, and that platform encourages the production of memes with tools to make imitation videos. Reddit meanwhile allows users to give “awards” to content, often paid for by real money. Twitter, now X, is mostly a text-based medium, and without the creator’s image, it likely affords different sensations of visibility than what we documented. In the popular press, we frequently hear about people experiencing the destabilizing impacts of virality, paradoxically, alongside its pursuit. This suggests that an experience of virality as pleasurable exists across platforms, though we expect those pleasures to be mediated by design architectures.

Towards a Critical Sociology of the New Attention Economy

Fame has always been a fickle and dynamic system (Marshall 2004), and it is always relational, with no absolute markers of it (Cohen 2023; Ferris 2007). Still, some celebrity names prove more durable than others. Names at the bottom of the fame hierarchy exhibit relatively fast turnover, while for those at the upper tiers, stable renown persists for decades, even centuries (Van de Rijt et al. 2013). Yet for the viral creators we studied, internet fame is never a state at which one arrives, nor can one find footing in any kind of durable system within it. Internet fame, for these creators, is a constant and relentless project. Without accumulating reputation, which offers some long-term possible rewards, viral creators work in the pursuit of the next hit. They illustrate the labor consequences of the new fame game: overwork, the pursuit of forever-growth metrics, anxiety, and FOMO.

Our study advances a critical sociology of the new attention economy by connecting the labor of internet fame to platform capitalism. We conclude by considering the problem of platform labor summarized by Tressie McMillam-Cottom: “Knowing the extractive terms of their labor does not diminish [workers’] enjoyment of the job. Platform capitalism owes much of its dominance to how good it feels to be captured by the platform” (2020: 446).

This paper has documented how and why platform capture feels so good. Platforms deliver affective experiences that propel creators to work harder, with similarities to compulsive play in gambling and gaming industries (Schüll 2012). Like machine gambling, where the house always wins, in platform capitalism, the platform wins. Returning to the gold rush analogy: in the 19th century, the companies that supplied miners were most consistently able to amass fortunes in the gold rushes. Because mines go through booms and busts, an old adage holds that in a gold rush, one should sell shovels. Platforms do a version of this. They enable highly addictive play by manipulating affect, affording gamification, and seducing workers to discipline themselves into overwork, ultimately to the platform’s benefit.

The experience of a viral high offers insights to other superstar markets, where affect plays a role in spiking labor commitment and market participation. For example, financial workers experience “synchronized collective emotional arousal,” which shapes commodities markets (Knorr Cetina and Brügger, 2002: 930). In venture capitalism, where financiers “chase unicorns,” and in crypto markets where investors push coins “to the moon,” market actors mobilize hype to propel growth (Sheehan 2024; Shestakofsky 2024). As more and more fields become platformized, more people will be able to visualize and gamify extreme success in increasingly winner-take-all economies, thus transforming the experience of work into addictive play.

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