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The Aspirational Ethos: Gender, Consumerism, and Labor

We read to dream and aspire, but also to acquire.

—*Carol Smith, publisher and chief revenue officer at* Harper's Bazaar

Hillary, a fresh-faced twenty-something hailing from coastal Virginia, had graduated college a few months prior to our interview. Though she was bringing in a steady paycheck from a job in retail, she found herself much more enthralled by the inner workings of the fashion industry. In her free time, she shared her sartorial inspirations on a personal style blog launched three years earlier; on several occasions, Hillary noted, she had overhauled the site completely. When I asked her about the current focus, she explained that it was written from the perspective of "someone making the transition from being in college and being able to get away with wearing whatever to applying for all those jobs and trying to make it in the post-grad life." She added, "It's about . . . using fashion as an outlet to be creative and express that search for a post-grad identity." Hillary's exposition about channeling *fashion for self-expression* fits rather neatly into theories of consumer culture, particularly critiques of capitalist ideologies that encourage articulations of selfhood through (women's) participation in the marketplace. Yet Hillary's blog wasn't *just* a digitally mediated

forum for creative expression; rather, she understood it as a potential career springboard. Indeed, she coveted a full-time career in fashion journalism and was inspired by the accounts of those who had evolved "from being independent bloggers to [those seated in] the front row of Fashion Week." She shared, "For somebody who aspires to be the next Anna Wintour [the iconic editor-in-chief of *Vogue*], that's the dream."

Hillary's ambition to break into the fashion industry is not unlike the professional aspirations of many of the young women I interviewed. And though careers in the creative industries are widely venerated in the popular imagination, the fashion sector is especially renowned for its aura of glitz, glamour, and dynamism. The seductive pull of the fashion world continues unabated—even as accounts circulate of its less-than-ideal working conditions. Fictional media portrayals offer a particularly negative caricature of the fashion and magazine industries: films like *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) and *Intern* (2000)—and reality shows like *The Hills* (2006–2010)—depict young staffers as catty and self-serving. Meanwhile, in the news media, the magazine and fashion industries have received a spate of negative publicity for exploiting young people as unpaid interns. Though internships are understood as veritable incubators for bright-eyed college students seeking entry-level employment, positions in the so-called "glamour industries" are typically unpaid. This system inevitably aggravates existing social inequalities. After all, only those from well-heeled families can afford the myriad expenses associated with "working for free."[1]

The heated debate surrounding the shuttering of the internship program at Condé Nast, the prestigious magazine company whose titles include *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Glamour*, and *GQ*, brought these concerns into sharp relief. In October 2013, representatives for the company announced that they would be closing their coveted

program, following a class-action lawsuit filed by two former Condé Nast interns. According to the plaintiffs, Condé Nast violated U.S. labor laws by failing to provide the interns with compensation through salary or educational benefits—despite the interns' role in performing value-added tasks for the corporation. One of the plaintiffs compared her *W* magazine internship to the portrayal of Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway's character) in *The Devil Wears Prada,* except, she explained to a reporter for the *New York Times,* "we don't get any makeover in the end."[2] A number of former interns—as well as aspiring magazine editorial workers—expressed disappointment, frustration, and even outrage with Condé Nast's decision.[3] Meanwhile, critics of the unpaid internship system declared it a landmark battle in the war against economic and educational inequities in the contingent workforce.[4] Though Condé Nast eventually settled the class-action suit, former interns were reportedly hesitant to take the settlement, fearing such actions would impact their future chances of getting hired by the company.[5] Such reluctance, though disheartening, is perhaps not surprising in an era when "reputation [has] become a key commodity."[6]

Initially seen as a cause célèbre, the Condé Nast case has done little to deter creative aspirants from utilizing various channels to pursue career prospects—including these very same, oft-unpaid internships. At the same time, young people like Hillary understand social media production as an additional—or perhaps alternative—pathway to a creative career. The ideal of *getting paid to do what you love* figures prominently here. In a 2015 *Mashable* article proposing the generational label of "yuccies," a (decidedly unpalatable) acronym for *Young Urban Creatives,* author David Infante explained how the contemporary job market is engorged with college-educated twenty-somethings "infected by the conviction that not only do we deserve to pursue our

dreams; we should profit from them."[7] Infante grounded his definition in a few yuccie career archetypes: "social consultants coordinating #sponsored Instagram campaigns for lifestyle brands," brogrammers (a clever portmanteau to signal the frat-boyish, "bro" culture of programming), and entrepreneurial-minded youth seduced by the potential offerings of the "internet playground."[8] The assumptions of enjoyment and leisure bolstering this "playground" narrative are not incidental: careers self-fashioned in the digital realm presumably pair pleasure and profitability.

Whether hoping to make inroads into a closed-off industry or coveting success as a digital entrepreneur, many enterprising young people are working fervently to prepare themselves for an imagined career future. But how are we to understand the productive activities of creative aspirants like Hillary in a meaningful way? To cyber-enthusiasts, digital content creators represent an emergent class of innovators empowered by technologies that upend traditional hierarchies of influence and expertise. To critics, however, these media makers are enlistees in the reserve army of the unpaid, exploited by companies paying in the always-deferred promise of "exposure." Neither of these perspectives tells the full story, in part because they almost fully disregard the significance of gendered relations and subjectivities.

"Aspirational labor" recasts the debate between digital media enthusiasts and detractors, in part by foregrounding gender and femininity. The idea refers to female content creators' belief that their (mostly) unpaid work, motivated by passion and the infectious rhetoric of entrepreneurialism, will eventually yield respectable income and rewarding careers. But aspirational labor, as a critical concept, also calls attention to the gap between this belief and the practical realities of the digital labor marketplace: just a few digital content creators reap significant material rewards from their activities. Somewhat

predictably, media trend pieces tend to spotlight those who ascend to the digital economies' highest echelons: the six-figure-salary bloggers and vloggers who have achieved celebrity status. For the rest, the potential for financial success is paltry. Blogging.com's survey of 1,000 bloggers found that a mere "17% are able to sustain their lifestyle or support their family with their blogs, while 81% never make even $100 from blogging."[9] Though these statistics describe blogging activities more generally, the fashion blogger behind Grit & Glamour sought to produce more precise figures through a survey of 130 fashion, beauty, and lifestyle bloggers. She cautioned that her investigation was "not a scientific survey, by any means," but it nonetheless yielded similarly disheartening results: a mere 8 percent of bloggers make enough money to actually live on.[10]

Such findings have done little to dissuade enterprising young women from pursuing their career aspirations online.

Over the last decade, a series of social, economic, and technological shifts have thrust the ideologies and practices of aspirational labor to center stage. But an important historical precedent for this practice can be found in *aspirational consumption*—status-induced consumerism that channels self-expression through the marketplace. To understand this transformation, I turn to the traditional (and rather crude) dichotomy of male producer/female consumer. In the introduction to *The Sex of Things,* Victoria de Grazia identifies a duality that has structured cultural assumptions about femininity since at least the Victorian era: "the dichotomized relationship between Mr. Breadwinner and Mrs. Consumer."[11] Such gender-based constructions are, of course, neither natural nor neutral, yet they have created and perpetuated a close affinity between femininity and shopping that has reinforced the structures of patriarchal capitalism.[12]

At the turn of the last century, before the ideals of Victorian puritanism had fully receded into the cultural background, social theorists widely denigrated consumerism, believing that women would be unable to control themselves when confronted with a kaleidoscope of mass-manufactured wares.[13] Literary tropes about the hysteria-induced kleptomaniac owe much of their substance to this discourse; in 1883, French novelist Émile Zola described "the women with a mania for stealing, a perversion of desire, a new kind of neurosis that was classified by a mental specialist who had observed the acute result of the temptation exercised on them by the department stores."[14] Above all, then, consumerism appeared as a public expression of female amorality. Though this concern predated the internet by more than a century, it bears striking resemblance to the social fears about women and technology that emerged at the dawn of the digital age. The recent incarnation of this "moral panic" positions digitally networked girls and young women as especially vulnerable to nefarious predators, or, alternatively, stigmatizes them for their (sexual) agency.[15] Contemporary anxieties about women online can be understood as an expression of this persistent, Victorian-era moral puritanism; the internet thus represents a public space inhabited by women, much like the early department store.

A different—though not entirely inconsistent—set of cultural assumptions about "women and consumerism" gained traction in the early twentieth century, most notably the construal of the excessively emotional female consumer.[16] Indeed, as sociologist Don Slater notes, women have been described in popular culture "as whimsical and inconstant, flighty and narcissistic; they can be seduced, or their resistance overcome, by stimuli or persuasion in order to achieve market penetration."[17] This pejorative image of feminine emotive frivolity is rendered all the more potent by the stereotype of the rational male producer against which it is positioned.

Constructions of social identity manifest themselves in other ways, too. In one of the earliest writings on consumer culture—Thorstein Veblen's caustic assessment of the *nouveau riche,* first published in 1899—derogatory assumptions about gender were firmly demarcated along class lines. In explicating his notion of "conspicuous consumption," Veblen contended that among wealthy classes, it is the *man* who puts his wealth "in evidence" by ostentatiously displaying the finest drinks, weaponry, games, and living spaces. In her role of "chattel" to her "master," the wife is expected to "consume only what is necessary to her sustenance—except so far as her further consumption contributes to the comfort or the good repute of her master."[18] Yet this gender hierarchy gets disrupted among members of the lower middle class. Writes Veblen, "As we descend the social scale, the point is presently reached where the duties of vicarious leisure and consumption devolve upon the wife alone."[19] For these classes, it is the wife who consumes ceremoniously and displays such products ostentatiously.[20]

Though Veblen articulates "conspicuous consumption" as a profoundly social phenomenon—driven by class emulation and "invidious comparison" (a sense of *keeping up with the Joneses* a full five decades before this imagined family moved into the Levittown, New York, suburbs)—he failed to address the producer side of the equation, namely the role of the nascent advertising industry in cultivating a vibrant consumer marketplace. And indeed, the debate about whether power lies in *consumers' agentic desires* or *producers' ability to create demand* has largely configured contemporary consumer critique.[21] Over the last three decades or so, histories of the advertising, media, and retail systems have provided fascinating glimpses into the processes and logics of encouraging consumption.[22] As historian Stuart Ewen explains of the mushrooming marketplace for consumer

goods that emerged in the wake of industrialization, "it became imperative to invest the laborer with a financial power and a psychic desire to consume."[23] The up-and-coming advertising industry rose to the task with alacrity.

Though advertisers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were charged with socializing the masses to desire newly created product categories and brands, they primarily focused on middle-class women, who had been designated as the *primary household purchasing agents.* A 1929 advertisement in *Printers' Ink,* the first U.S. trade publication dedicated to the ad industry, brought this gender division into stark relief. Reworking a line from poet Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man," the text noted, "The proper study of mankind is man . . . but the proper study of market is women."[24] And accordingly, early advertisers worked feverishly to both guide and legitimize the shopping behaviors of "Mrs. Consumer." Ads offered prescriptions on how to be a "good" wife and mother by, for instance, maintaining a clean home, preparing hearty meals for her family, and keeping her skin soft and supple. Alternatively, dishpan hands, poor hygiene, and visible markers of age were pathologized as impediments to marriage and, ultimately, happiness. Powered by the venerable authority of these representations, such stereotypes helped to shape a limited—and limiting—ideal of domestic femininity.[25]

Of course, advertising professionals were not exclusively responsible for propagating these cultural tropes; instead, they worked closely with burgeoning media channels and, most especially, the women's magazine industry. Widely distributed and astonishingly visual, women's periodicals were seen as essential conduits to reach mothers and wives during their moments of leisure. These mass-circulation periodicals served as instruction manuals for middle-class women through their unique arsenal of content: dress patterns and recipes,

images of the home, advice columns, literary fiction, and, of course, ads peddling products to improve the life of Mrs. Consumer. The *Ladies' Home Journal,* in particular, is credited with ushering in the era of the "gendered advertising forum," under the guidance of publishers Cyrus and Louisa Knapp Curtis.[26] The Curtises sought to lure prospective clients with ad placements adjacent to editorial content, a presumed assurance that readers would pay attention to the ads. Other publishers reportedly helped advertisers to create effective messages, while simultaneously publishing editorials informing their readers of the value of advertising for consumer decision-making.[27]

Even in the late nineteenth century, assumptions about class—or more accurately, the boot-strappist ideal of class mobility—steered the direction of ad messages in the United States. As media historian Nancy Walker contends, women's magazine editors were guided by the assumption that their mostly middle-class readers "aspired to improve their class standing, by improving their material surroundings."[28] Often, this ideal focused on domestic life, presenting "what the reader should want and aspire to—a larger house, more stylish clothing—and thus helping to define domestic concerns in terms of consumer culture."[29] The ideal of class ascendance continues to drive the production of imagery and messages in women's magazines and ads. When I interviewed Jason Wagenheim, who at the time was the vice president and publisher of *Teen Vogue,* about the magazine's (imagined) reader, he offered: she's the "type of young woman [who] may not be able to afford Gucci this second, but she can get the [sun]glasses for four hundred dollars . . . and she's matching them with her H&M or Topshop dress."

The evolving class consciousness captured in ads was—and remains—a response to larger transformations in cultural and economic life. Among the changes that unfurled over the first decades of

the twentieth century were new understandings about the division between public and private life—a cultural barrier long structured through the binary of masculine/public and feminine/private. In fact, up through the antebellum era, it was considered unfit for middle-class women to appear alone in public spaces; after all, the city was a place for *women of the street.*[30] However, the newfangled department stores of the fin de siècle era were instrumental in overturning these cultural norms; through the coordinated efforts of store merchants like Harry Gordon Selfridge and John Wanamaker, department stores rose to prominence as "safe" spaces for women. In London, for instance, Selfridge publicized his eponymous department store as a venue that would protect women against the dangers of the city.[31] Meanwhile, U.S. department stores were constructed as retail enclaves where women could congregate with ease; hairdressers, tearooms, and nurseries were meant to facilitate leisure-time socialization.[32] As William Leach explains in his fascinating history of North American department stores, merchants strategically aimed to exploit women's class position. Fur displays, in particular, were designed "to stir up feelings of social inadequacy and envy"; merchants hoped such anxieties would prompt impulse buying.[33]

Collectively, then, these cultural histories of the advertising, media, and retail industries reveal the extent to which feminine ideals were deeply intertwined with appeals to upward mobility and *aspiration.* Indeed, just as Veblen argued that foppish members of the *nouveau riche* adorned their bodies and homes with ostentatious displays of wealth, early twentieth-century advertisers seemed to believe that female consumers could be seduced by fantasies of class ascendance.[34] Thus, ads circulating in the first decades of the twentieth century tended to depict the upper and upper-middle classes, ostensibly enticing (mostly female) consumers "to envision themselves occupying a

higher rung on society's ladder than most of them in fact did."[35] Such pitches encouraged what is often described as aspirational consumption, whereby individuals purchase products or brands to imitate the consumer behavior of those occupying higher-class standing. By the 1950s, as the kitchen became a central place to demonstrate markers of (female) class status, aspirational appeals infiltrated ads for "new" models of appliances and labor-saving devices.[36]

The modern incarnations of aspirational consumption are variegated, and many of the social media producers I interviewed mentioned brands to symbolically communicate social status—be it of themselves, their fellow bloggers/Instagrammers, or their perceived readers. For example, Chanel was desirable but a brand "[not] every girl can afford"; Old Navy, by contrast, was available to the masses. A college student I spoke with coveted over-the-knee Stuart Weitzman boots but couldn't spend "half my paycheck on this pair of boots." Here, it should be noted that "class" is a sociological concept rife with interpretation; in classical social theory, it has been hitched to notions of wealth and material goods, power and consent, status, and "life chance," among others.[37]

Sociologists of consumption have found Pierre Bourdieu's writings on the symbolic structure of resources to be especially fruitful for mining the relationship between class and consumerism, and I draw on his typology of capital throughout this book.[38] Bourdieu explicates the "three fundamental guises" under which capital may appear: *economic,* which translates directly into financial wealth; *cultural,* which corresponds to educational qualifications and intellect; and *social,* which can exist as a title of nobility but often reflects relational networks—all of which are more or less convertible to others.[39] Bourdieu eschews an economically deterministic model of class identity in favor of a more dynamic system that foregrounds education, experience,

and social distinction, among others. A person's manner of dress is thus an expression of her *cultural capital;* it is rendered visible in the red-lacquered soles of Christian Louboutin footwear, the interlocking "C"s fashioned onto the enclosure of a Chanel clutch, the signature roundel that distinguishes a BMW, and the sleek band and oversized interface of the Apple Watch.[40]

Aspirational consumerism is thus understood as emulation of those with a higher level of *cultural capital;* the visible and social nature of material goods—both attributes that were highlighted by Veblen—remain central to this practice. Yet, while Veblen seems to condense conspicuousness and aspiration in drawing attention to the class-based performances animating consumer behavior, we would be remiss to read these terms as interchangeable. While ostentatious displays by the *nouveau riche* discernably communicate something about whom the individual *is,* aspirational consumerism is a projection of *who the individual may become.* The timeline for class mobility is therefore stretched out into an imagined future.

Ostensibly, appeals to aspirationalism are especially pertinent in the current, post-recession era, as many continue to seek out full-time, stable employment. In this so-called "age of austerity"—a phrase not without its critics—consumption is more likely to be focused on the future self, one living an improved life flush with shiny, new products. It is thus not incidental that when the publisher and chief revenue officer of women's fashion monthly *Harper's Bazaar* announced an e-commerce initiative called ShopBazaar in 2012, she reasoned, "We read to dream and aspire, but also to acquire." A designer I interviewed, Siobhan, made a similarly poignant remark when discussing self-presentation in the age of social media: "It circles back around to that same fashion trope, which is all about aspiration. . . . It's about selling an idea to somebody, and appealing to who they think they

are, and/or who they want to be, and outside of the reality of themselves."

Though the indelible specter of "Mr. Breadwinner/Mrs. Consumer" still looms large—most unmistakably in representations in popular culture of the steely businessman or the shopping mall–cavorting female—this stubborn binary has been challenged on a number of fronts. For one, feminist scholars and activists have helped to lay bare the role of women's unpaid domestic and reproductive labor in maintaining the circuit of capital.[41] The lineages of this reasoning can be traced to radical Marxist feminism in Italy and, in the United States, sociologies of the gendered division of labor. Beginning in the 1970s, Italian feminists critiqued their Marxist brethren for failing to recognize housework, childcare, elder care, and other domestic responsibilities as the very "work that produces and reproduces labor power."[42] One especially influential voice was scholar-activist Leopoldina Fortunati, who identified the socio-political implications of the unequal exploitation of men and women under capitalism:

> Unlike the male worker . . . [the housewife] is posited as non-value, she cannot obtain money for her work, she receives no wage in exchange . . . she cannot hold money. . . . [W]ithin the family the housewife and her husband . . . enter into relations . . . without equal rights, therefore *not equal* in the eyes of the law.[43]

In an attempt to render visible the "women's work" that sustains modern capitalism, members of the International Feminist Collective orchestrated the International Wages for Housework Campaign in 1972. Assembling behind the rallying cry, "If women were paid for all they

do, there'd be a lot of wages due," activists demanded material compensation for women's domestic labor—the very same activities that are often concealed behind heteronormative ideals of femininity. While the political gains of the campaign were—and still *are*—disputed, this project helped to draw attention to the structural inequalities inherent in the gendered division of labor.[44] And many of those involved with the campaign continue to advocate for bringing gender to the fore of Italian Marxism.

With the broadening recognition of the role of immaterial labor in powering the post-industrial economy, theorizations of women's domestic and/or care work have been shoehorned into critical writings on affective labor, defined as the "labor that produces or manipulates affects."[45] Yet to Silvia Federici, a co-founder of the International Feminist Collective, "women's work" is made all the more obscure by the "demystifying" language of affect. Taking particular aim at the writings of her Marxist contemporaries Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Federici outlines what gets lost in their designation of "affective labor": "the feminist analysis of the function of the sexual division of labor, the function of gender hierarchies, [and] the analysis of the way capitalism has urged the wage to mobilize women's work in the reproduction of the labor force."[46] Accordingly, the period since the 1990s has been experiencing an "affective turn" across the disciplines; despite this intellectual momentum, there is a lingering reluctance to think through "women's work" and affect studies.[47] A notable exception is Kylie Jarrett, whose notion of the "digital housewife" establishes parallels between unpaid domestic and reproductive (female) labor and consumer contributions to digital media industries.[48] Following Jarrett, I agree that "the uncanny, ghostly presence of women's labor can provide a framework to reinvigorate analysis of specific qualities of the laboring involved in the digital economy."[49]

Marxist feminism is not the only tradition to call attention to the profoundly gendered nature of certain forms of (under-valued) labor. With intellectual roots in American sociology, Arlie Hochschild explored the feminized nature of service work in her now-canonical 1983 monograph, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling.* A key theme in the book is what she terms "emotional labor," which she defines as labor that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."[50] Service professionals—she was looking at flight attendants and bill collectors, among other professions—are thus encouraged to *manage* their feelings according to organizational structures and scripts. Although Hochschild located the rise of emotional labor in the political-economic movement from a goods-based to a service economy, she also explores the various ways in which considerations of gender structure this system. Indeed, she seems to presage later discussions of the "feminization of the workforce" by noting the economy's demand for "skills in personal relations, the womanly art of status enhancement and the emotional work that it requires [which have] been made more public, more systematized, and more standardized."[51] One of my interviewees acknowledged the hidden costs of this labor quite explicitly: "There's a certain emotional labor that goes into being a female YouTuber. You just have to deal with people being shitty." I return to the topic of emotional labor later in the book; yet the remark from this vlogger suggests how gendered overtones structure such virtual interactions.

The traditionally gendered producer/consumer binary has been further eroded by the influx of women into the global workforce, predominantly in the aftermath of feminism's second wave. According to the U.S. Labor Statistics and Census Bureau, the number of female

workers mushroomed from 30.3 million in 1970 to 72.7 million in the early 2000s. Though these raw statistics are staggering, they obscure less auspicious trends in the contemporary labor pool: the actual *percentage* of women entering the workforce has remained relatively stagnant since the 1980s, and many career sectors remain sharply divided by sex. For instance, the top-ranked positions for women in 1970 were secretaries, bookkeepers, and elementary school teachers; in the first decade of the 2000s, the leading occupations for female professionals were remarkably similar: administrative assistants, cashiers, and elementary and middle school teachers.[52] Further, the oft-cited wage gap statistic that *women earn $0.77 for every dollar earned by men* reveals the persistence of gender-based discrimination, with women of color faring significantly worse.[53]

These indicators have, perhaps unsurprisingly, emerged as catalysts for larger conversations about the presence and status of women in the workforce, including debates about the sex-based division of labor, the social demands of parenting and other domestic responsibilities, and labor policy reforms. In recent years, a handful of prominent female writers and executives have helped to steer the media conversation. In 2012, public policy scholar Anne-Marie Slaughter published a cover story in the *Atlantic* on "Why Women Still Can't Have It All"; notably, the online version was the most viewed article to date. In the op-ed, Slaughter poignantly detailed her decision to abandon her post as a high-ranking public official in order to spend more time with her family, including two teenage sons. A self-identified feminist and "high-profile career woman," Slaughter confessed that she never imagined she would face a choice between her career and her family; however, working for the government meant a demanding schedule over which she had little control. With the new position, then, Slaughter came to realize that "having it all was not

possible in many types of jobs . . . at least not for long." Slaughter plainly denounced the workplace structures that force so many women to confront this decision, including inflexible work schedules and employers' expectations of the ever-present, connected employee.

Slaughter's piece has been held up as a rejoinder to Sheryl Sandberg, who in 2012 was gearing up for the launch of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead,* a book based on her wildly popular TED talk several years prior. Sandberg, the Harvard-educated COO of Facebook, prodded career-minded females to *lean in* as they endeavor to close what she calls the "global ambition gap" for women. Although Sandberg aligned herself with the objectives of feminism, she placed the onus on women for "lower[ing] our own expectations of what we can achieve."[54] Consequently, some public voices—including Slaughter—have critiqued Sandberg's dismissal of systematic barriers and structural conditions that stunt women's career progress. And, true to form, the mainstream media pitted these women against each other in a fierce debate.

A strong undercurrent of this so-called debate is the impact of new employment schedules—including the much-idealized flexible model. To be sure, widespread internet usage has figured prominently in modern arrangements that enable employees to work remotely and/or set their own schedules. It should be understood, though, that such changes are *also* symptomatic of the ideologies and processes of post-Fordism, a term that describes the progressive movement of organizations toward flexible specialization and decentralized production. Of course, post-Fordism amounts to much more than an altered system of production and is concomitant with a series of socioeconomic and technological shifts, including the rapid development of an information- or knowledge-based economy. Within this information economy, notions of flexibility assume a political

valance. Indeed, for working mothers beset by the burden of balancing personal and professional demands, telecommuting and "smart homes" were introduced with a wave of euphoria. Just as mid-century technologies like the dishwasher and laundry machine were discursively positioned as "labor-saving devices" for the female homemaker, modern innovations have been celebrated for their ability to emancipate women from patriarchal work structures.[55] In a 2016 article published by Bitch Media, freelance writer Sarah Grey contended that women are increasingly being "squeeze[d] out of the workplace" by a constellation of corporate cost-cutting measures, including the "lack of paid maternity leave, inadequate time off, little flexibility, and unequal pay that doesn't always cover the cost of childcare."[56] For Grey, freelancing and contracting enable her to exert necessary control over her schedule as she juggles work with childcare responsibilities and a chronic illness.

Importantly, though, studies of flexi-work reveal that these tools have done little to unsettle structural gender inequalities—an issue Grey alluded to in the conclusion of her piece.[57] Internet scholar Melissa Gregg explores how "presence bleed"—the blurring together of the work and home spheres—disproportionally impacts female workers.[58] The women in her study had to "fight for time to perform paid work pursuits" because of the reverberations of the so-called "second shift" of domestic care.[59] Those I interviewed, similarly, noted how this always-on, multi-tasking mentality had impacted their personal lives: partners pleading with them to come to bed in the wee hours of the morning or turning the computer back on after putting the kids to bed. Heather recalled a family vacation from her days as a full-time mommy blogger: "My kids were swimming in the pool, and I'm upstairs in a hotel room on the Wi-Fi trying to get something published."

Though women's inroads into the employment economy are a marker of political progress, such laboring activities were historically steeped in appeals to feminine consumerism—particularly in the media and culture industries.[60] Whether as content creators, researchers, or sales professionals, women played a crucial role in the journalism, advertising, and beauty industries, shaping the direction of these businesses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[61] Thus, while the post-Victorian beauty industry deployed enterprising women as a revolutionary, trust-building sales force, women's magazine executives relied upon female editorial voices to relate to the unique experiences of middle-class women. However, with women's magazines as texts *of* (i.e., produced by) and *for* (i.e., consumed by) women, the presentation of female staffers grew primarily out of a business logic—rather than a political one.[62] The owners of early women's magazines were guided by the assumption that female consumers would be inspired to follow the advice of female experts; thus, (male) executives invited female editors and columnists to join their staff.

Similar reasoning infiltrated the early advertising industry, as young women were hired and tasked with producing copy and visual appeals that could best address the (perceived) needs of the proverbial *Mrs. Consumer.* Consumer culture historian Jennifer Scanlon's study of female professionals in the J. Walter Thompson agency during the 1920s and 1930s seems to nuance the business-versus-politics understanding of the workforce composition; she argues that "these women often approached their work with a missionary spirit about the consumer culture, a spirit many of them carried over from the progressive politics of their college educations, suffrage activities or social work experiences."[63] Of course, this framing does not belie the fact that these female workers were part of an industry sustained by appeals to an overwhelmingly female audience. Who best to develop effective ad

appeals for food, cleaning products, clothing, and cosmetics aimed at middle-class women *than other women?* Yet because of the disparity between these two groups—upper-class, former suffragists who sought independence in the professional domain and, by contrast, traditional, middle-class stay-at-homers—the former "remained invisible to the world of women's magazines and advertising for decades to come."[64] As should be apparent by now, "invisible labor" is a recurrent theme in thinking through the productive contributions of women across eras, contexts, and industries.

It was, rather unsurprisingly, the second-wave feminist movement that brought concerns about the unequal status of female media workers to public consciousness. Prime targets of the feminist movement were women's magazines—with their staid representations of domestic femininity emerging from a predominantly male editorship. During one widely publicized 1970 protest, more than a hundred women staged a sit-in at the office of then–*Ladies' Home Journal* editor-in-chief John Mack Carter; at the time, senior editor Lenore Hershey was one of the *only* female staffers. As feminist scholar Bonnie Dow summarized, "For eleven hours, protestors demanded an all-female editorial staff, childcare for employees and an end to advertisements on makeup and appliances. . . . They targeted every characteristic that defined women's magazines at the time."[65] The sit-in prompted various changes: Carter let the activists edit a portion of the magazine later that year, and by 1973, Hershey had stepped into the role of editor-in-chief.[66] The succeeding years saw massive workforce changes unfurl, largely spurred by the women's liberation movement. During a 1993 interview, two decades after the *Ladies' Home Journal* sit-in, *Glamour* magazine's then-editor-in-chief Ruth Whitney provided a snapshot of the composition of the women's magazine industry: "The staff at *Glamour* is almost entirely female. The edito-

rial staff numbers more than sixty and another forty that comprise the business area." She enthused, "At Condé Nast itself, working conditions and attitudes have changed."[67]

Despite Whitney's optimism, executive teams of (almost exclusively white) men tend to dominate the upper echelons of the magazine publishing business.[68] This disparity is indicative of a more widespread gender gap endemic to nearly all of the major media industries, with the role and status of women especially bleak at the highest levels of contemporary media organizations. In 2015, on the heels of the Women's Media Center's release of its annual report on the "Status of Women in the U.S. Media," *Time* magazine highlighted some particularly "sad truths" about gender-based inequities: the percentage of women in sports journalism was an abysmally low 10 percent; male journalists had an overwhelming margin in the area of hard news; and the large majority (83 percent) of Hollywood executives were male.[69] Moreover, these gender imbalances have important intersectionalities with race and ethnicity; women of color fared worse than white women across all categories examined in the 2015 report.[70]

The statistics are grim in other geographic contexts, too. The publication of the first "Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media," which drew upon a study of 500 companies in 59 nations, highlighted some of the stark disparities across nation-states. Overall, though, the 2013 survey revealed that men held 73 percent of top management jobs and nearly two-thirds of reporting jobs. Fortunately, the pattern was less dire among news-gathering, editing, and writing positions.[71] In making a case for the need to take the macro-level relationship between media and gender—including policy, financial, and ownership structures—seriously, feminist media scholar Carolyn Byerly contends that the overwhelming control of media in-

dustries by men gives them the power to determine which messages and images to circulate to broader publics.[72]

While the national and global surveys listed above detail the prevalence of vertical segregation—the glass ceiling metaphor—David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker produce compelling insight about horizontal, or occupational, segregation within the television, magazine, and music industries. Among the implications they identify: the tendency of jobs performed by a large majority of women to pay less; sex-based divisions which challenge ideals of autonomy and freedom; segregated cultures that make it more challenging for workers to "match their talents to their occupations"; and gender clusters which tend to perpetuate stereotypes.[73] Such findings tend to reaffirm studies of other creative professionals published over the last decade: while men dominate more prestigious creative roles as well as technical and craft fields, women are concentrated in marketing, communications, and service roles.[74]

The high ratio of women working in public relations—estimates range from 73 to 85 percent—has led to its designation of a "pink ghetto."[75] In 2014, *New York Magazine* writer Ann Friedman questioned why the field "remains synonymous with the worst female stereotypes":

> While there are many men in PR—including 80 percent of upper management—it's women, often young women, who are likely to be doing the grunt work of sending emails and writing tweets and cold-calling contacts. The very work that journalists, and the rest of us, are likely to see as fluffy.[76]

A year later, then–*Medium* editor Alana Hope Levinson invoked the "pink ghetto" aphorism in a poignant self-reflection on the marginal

standing of social media workers within contemporary news organizations. Social media, she learned, is disparaged as a "girly job"—despite its central role in steering the twenty-first-century news business. Levinson notes the striking similarities between digital media work and PR, explaining that "they both, at their essence, involve promotion; and they're both—if done well—invisible."[77] This invisibility manifests itself in various ways—in the lack of female bylines, the shifting regimes of credit to male superiors, and the tendency of women to absorb the organizational "flack."[78]

There is, of course, another "pink ghetto" in the creative industries—the sprawling culture of unpaid internships. College students eager to pad their resumes and schmooze with prospective employers are prodded to "pay their dues" or "work for exposure" through these oft-uncompensated positions. And the market for unpaid interns is markedly gendered. In his exposé of exploitative conditions of the internship system, Ross Perlin pinpoints both gender- and class-based internship injustices, with the former attributed to "the fields women gravitate toward and possibly also [to the likelihood that] female students have been more accepting of unpaid, unjust situations."[79] Researchers at the University of Victoria and the Canadian Intern Association produced empirical research confirming the gender disparity in unpaid internships—or that "the unpaid intern economy rides on the backs of young women."[80]

Many of the creative aspirants I interviewed held internships prior to—or concomitant with—their social media productions. Reflecting on the general character of internships in the glamour industries, college student Nishita offered, "It's really hard to find a good paid internship when it comes to the fashion or creative industry. Mine wasn't paid. I just did it for the experience and just to learn more about everything." Lauren, another young woman seemingly

indoctrinated in the "work for exposure" narrative, explained that though her internship was unpaid, she received "exposure to the industry and . . . to put [the position] on your resume, and it's a really good experience to improve your writing." Kelly, too, was optimistic in recalling her former stint as an intern at *Teen Vogue*. Though the unpaid position required her to commute back and forth between Philadelphia and New York (nearly one hundred miles) at least three times a week, she concluded that she "would not take back that experience for the world." The experiences of these creative aspirants corroborate research by Michelle Rodino-Colocino and Stephanie Berberick, who conducted a series of focus groups with former PR interns; their sample, perhaps not surprisingly, was 85 percent female. They learned that interns seem to render their "bitch work" more tolerable through individualized narratives of "hope, love, and luck."[81]

Disparaging terms like "fluffy," "bitch work," and "the pink ghetto" testify to the fact that inequalities in the creative sectors are more than just "numbers" issues. Rather, they are bound up with historical and social constructions of gender that have done little to unsettle assumptions that have rendered women a *particular kind of creative laborer.*

In stark contrast to their high concentrations in the promotional industries, women's roles and status in the tech sector are marginal, at best. The number of female tech workers employed by the industry juggernauts—Apple, Google, Facebook, and Microsoft—is astonishingly low; Apple is the only one to climb above the 20 percent mark, and the figures are especially bleak for women of color.[82] More alarming still, a study by the American Association of University Women found that the gender gap in computing is actually widening. In 2013, women held only 26 percent of computing positions, a marked

decline from 35 percent in 1990.[83] Silicon Valley—with its über-hip lot of start-ups and innovation industries—is a notoriously inhospitable work climate for women. Discourses of (masculine-coded) entrepreneurship are firmly entrenched in tech culture, which, as internet scholar Alice Marwick argues, is doubly problematic for women: "Entrepreneurialism is a loaded concept that incorporates male-normative notions of behavior and success, and because entrepreneurs are so high status, this means that women have been systematically excluded from the highest levels of the technology scene."[84]

Some of the women I interviewed, particularly those who had more experience in start-up culture, shared their own experiences with subtle and not-so-subtle sexism in the tech fields. Siobhan, an aspiring fashion entrepreneur, spoke at length about the ways in which gender biases shape the experiences of women in business, particularly:

> I think that as a [female] entrepreneur, a lot of the resources . . . are limited because you are going to be in female-centric businesses, which tend to not have the capital interest that other ones do. I just think about in terms of some of the VCs [venture capital firms], and I can only think of really one that specializes in fashion. When you think about a start-up company, and they're going to get investment, it's usually a guy, it's usually a tech company. And even if it's not a tech company, the people that are giving the money are men.

Meanwhile, Ana R., a longtime computer programmer, left her career because of a pervasive sense of feeling "pushed out." During our interview, she challenged the common assumption that the lack of women in technology is a "pipeline problem." She explained, "If there's not

enough women in technology, it's because women don't want to go into technology because there's so much bias."

In recent years, mainstream media have cast a much-needed spotlight on this issue, exposing forms of gender discrimination across the new media and technology industries. For instance, the *New York Times* reported that female computer engineers and programmers were abandoning lucrative posts because of an alpha-male culture where they are frequently dismissed, harassed, and even threatened.[85] An especially high-profile case concerns former Reddit CEO Ellen Pao, whom the *Washington Post* dubbed "one of the most recognizable faces in the debate over discrimination in Silicon Valley."[86] After she filed a gender harassment suit against her former employer, venture capitalist firm Kleiner Perkins, a jury ruled against Pao, who declined to appeal. Her self-reflection on the experience appeared in *Lenny,* a feminist magazine spearheaded by actress Lena Dunham:

> I saw inconsistencies in what people said and what they actually did. I saw many firms talking meritocracy but ignoring great opportunities that women brought in or giving men credit for them. I saw the bar for promotion move as soon as a woman crossed it. I saw inconsistencies in how aggressiveness and strong opinions were rewarded across genders. I heard stories about harassment and off-color jokes and sexist/ageist/racist conversations. Women founders were pushed out or into lesser roles as a condition for investment, while similarly inexperienced male founders were given the benefit of the doubt and supported.[87]

Although Pao went on to champion a series of anti-harassment measures at Reddit, she soon became the victim of a targeted attack by

internet trolls. In late 2015, Pao publicly announced her decision to step down from the executive post.

The gaming industry is another creative field where misogyny and sexual harassment run rampant. Indeed, feminist game scholars Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw note that while the number of women *consuming* games is relatively equal to that of men, women are a minority when it comes to the *production* of games. Institutional sexism is so pervasive that even those connected to the industry—game reviewers or critics like Anita Sarkeesian—have been subjected to rape and death threats. Chess and Shaw describe how they, too, became the target of online trolls as part of the #Gamergate scandal.[88] Unfortunately, even initiatives which are specifically designed to promote women in technology are mired by deeply ingrained stereotypes and lingering devaluations of gendered labor. For instance, Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher's study of the Difference Engine Initiative—a Canadian incubator designed to support female video game developers—revealed that despite the seemingly admirable mission of the initiative, unequal power relations were maintained through immaterial labor.[89]

Such findings are a testament to the substantial amount of invisible labor structured into an economy where workers are compelled to promote themselves and deploy their affective skills. And while the narrative that sustains this logic is the problematic assumption that women are uniquely positioned to engage in such modes of affective labor, it is a contemporary truism that all cultural workers face increasing demands to manage their self-presentations. The features of what Lisa Adkins called the "cultural feminization of economic life"—including flexibility, mobility, an emphasis on image/aesthetics, and various subjective performances—make clear how understandings of gender and labor must go beyond the sheer number of women participating in

the labor force.[90] Scholars have thus adopted the rhetoric of feminized employment to explain how contemporary work is evermore "insecure, flexible, invisible, and/or poorly paid."[91]

With all the promises of democratization ascribed to the internet era, the unabated growth of online communication over the last two decades has helped to challenge certain aspects of the gendered division of labor while rendering others all the more potent. It is for this very reason that discussions of the internet as either "masculine" or "feminine" are crude, at best. Nonetheless, the early, Tim Berners-Lee era internet was dominated by men, and the gender disparity was staggering. According to a Nielsen internet usage survey conducted in 1997, two-thirds of internet users were male, and men made up 77 percent of time spent online.[92] The reasons for the gender gap were multifarious: the internet was created by predominantly male teams of computer scientists and governmental personnel; women were less likely to be socialized into the computer sciences; access to tools and technological training was sharply divided by gender; and, among the women who *did* go online, many experienced pejorative, demeaning, even threatening forms of discrimination.[93] Moreover, the stereotype of internet users that circulated in the popular imagination was a rather narrowly defined one, oft-typified by the geeky white male programmer, hacker, or gamer. Digital culture scholar Joseph Turow explains that 1990s media and marketing executives worked under the assumption of an exclusively male user-base; companies urged advertisers to "promote themselves on the 'information superhighway' [with] pictures of upscale, educated males who were making computers and the media connected to them the center of their business and leisure activities."[94]

Despite the persistence of these narratives, early online communities were vibrant spaces for female collectives—ranging from support

groups to grassroots, advocacy organizations to fan communities. As the authors of *Spreadable Media* explain, the early internet provided

> female participants with access to new skills and technologies as their members took their first steps into cyberspace, reversing early conceptions about the gendering of digital culture as a space only for masculine mastery. In particular, female fans were early adopters of social network technologies, such as *Live Journal* and Dreamwidth, using the resources offered by new media technologies (podcasting, mp3s, video-sharing sites) to create their own distinctive forms of "participatory culture."[95]

While some genres of this female-driven "participatory culture" drew upon mainstream media, literature, and art, others assumed a political valance, most especially e-zines (electronic magazines). The digital offspring of indie-alternative print zines like *Riot Grrrl* (Europe) and *Bitch,* e-zines like the Grrrl Zone offered women an expressive outlet that was firmly positioned against mainstream culture.[96] The grrrl zinesters website, for instance (active 2002–2007), offered a globally networked space for "critically and politically thinking feminist girls and women" to "passionately discuss feminist theory, politics and activism and their impact on our lives."[97] The prevalence of these and other genres led feminist internet scholars to challenge the dominant understanding of the internet—and the blogosphere—as a "masculine" activity and domain.[98] Indeed, narratives of female entrepreneurship began to percolate, bolstered by the emergence of online destinations controlled by women. Internet scholar Susan Herring singled out modes of self-publishing as well as online community ventures that could potentially support the interests of a female user-base—both of which were articulated as digitally enabled conduits to professional success.[99]

At the same time, some of the grassroots, feminist sites that were launched in the early days of the web underwent a transformation as part of the progressive commercialization of the internet.[100] The years bracketing the new millennium saw the incorporation of several popular female-only sites; for instance, women.com merged with Hearst magazines, and later the site was combined with iVillage—another independently created site, which was purchased by NBCUniversal in 2006 before shuttering in 2015.[101] As Herring astutely observed of this trend, the web's shift

> from social action to individual fulfillment is consistent with a larger trend on the Internet whereby communitarian discourses and discourses about participatory democracy are receding in importance as commercialism comes increasingly to the fore.[102]

Herring's comment about commercialism "[coming] to the fore" seems nostalgically outdated now, in an era where the web's non-commercial roots are largely forgotten, buried beneath a veritable heap of sponsored messages, native content, and cookie-tracked conversations. And, perhaps not surprisingly, the construction of women as especially communicative digital consumers has found a welcome home in the social media economy. One particular way that historical and industrial constructions of gender get reified in the digital realm is through reports on the "social" nature of women's online interactions.[103]

As internet conversations have migrated from chat-rooms and message boards to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, the valorization of female internet users has only intensified. In fact, some have even suggested the second decade of the millennium marks a new phase: "the feminization of the internet."[104] This assumption is in part linked

to the profound growth of social networks where women tend to cluster: female users have a slight majority over men across Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram. The gender gap is especially pronounced on Pinterest, a site regarded for its arsenal of expressly feminine content, with neatly organized images of wedding ideas, home decor, recipes, and children's projects.[105] To this end, *Washington Post* columnist Petula Dvorak called the site "digital crack for women."[106]

The internet has also given rise to markedly gendered—and unabashedly commercial—genres of content production: fashion blogging, beauty vlogging, mommy blogging, and DIY design, among others. In the popular imagination, these activities are widely

2. Maeve Stier, an aspiring model and the blogger behind Chic Now, showcases some styles for "between seasons." Photo Credit: Blogger.

touted as platforms for self-expression and individualism—resonant ideals in discourses of post-feminism. By re-routing *consumption* as a mode of cultural *production,* these activities promise to disrupt traditional gendered hierarchies and financially empower (mostly) female participants.[107]

The gendered history of the producer/consumer binary is a multifarious one, structured through evolving norms about women's social positioning within various spheres, most especially the public and private domains. Fortunately, these rudimentary—and overwhelmingly patriarchal—norms have been challenged on a number of fronts, and once-airtight boundaries are being slowly effaced. Yet the specter of traditional, gender-based divisions—such as *Mr. Breadwinner* and *Mrs. Consumer*—lingers on. Thus, while female workers have made substantial gains in the labor force since the women's liberation movement, occupational inequalities and social hierarchies persist—though they are much too often brushed aside with narratives about innate "gender differences" or, alternatively, "pipeline problems."

The media and creative industries—including the particular career sectors of fashion, entertainment, and new media—offer a prism through which to examine various constructions and ambivalences surrounding gendered labor. Indeed, despite the glamorization of these career fields in the popular imagination, contemporary culture industries continue to be mired by systematic patterns of horizontal and vertical segregation. In the case of the former, whereby women cluster in the so-called "pink ghetto" of promotional or below-the-line jobs, feminized forms of emotional labor are rendered obscure by social constructions of women as intrinsically social communicators.[108] This argument does not deny the fact that men, too, are increasingly expected to engage in emotional or immaterial labor as part of the

widespread feminization of the workforce in a service-based economy.[109] However, these progressive shifts have done little to overturn the antagonism in the discursive separation between "men's work" and "women's work." Specifically, patterned gender discrepancies mean that women shoulder most of the risk/low visibility/emotional labor—as they remain far removed from the executive suites.

With social media usage skyrocketing, seemingly feminized activities, like child-rearing, decorating, knitting, and fashion styling/modeling, are imbued with opportunities for female empowerment and financial independence.[110] Reflecting how digitally mediated modes of self-expression assume a progressive bent, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Inna Arzumanova argue that, for fashion haulers, "crafting one's personal identity in front of a web-cam . . . is not positioned as narcissistic, but rather empowering, precisely because these activities nurture the promise of an entrepreneurial future."[111] Etsy-preneurs, mom-preneurs, and blogger-preneurs seem to represent the vanguard of female business success in the early twenty-first century. The fashion bloggers, designers, YouTubers, and Instagrammers I interviewed, too, see their activities as paths to potentially lucrative and fulfilling careers—despite the fact that they are centrally positioned within the consumer sphere. But these laboring activities, like forms of status-enhancing consumption that preceded them, must be understood as fundamentally *aspirational.* Social media producers approach their activities as investments in a future self—*one who will (hopefully) get paid to do what she loves.*