Preface

Popular rhetoric suggests that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have opened the sluice gates of creative expression. The idea is seductive, and it helps to explain the appeal of social media for the legions of young aspirants hoping to break into the creative industries. As a scholar of cultural production, I was intrigued by the promise of self-made careers fashioned online. I had just finished a book on the women's magazine industry, which chronicled producers' efforts to contain the impending threat of fashion bloggers and other independent voices. Could these social media creators really bypass the legacy companies or, alternatively, harness the currency of their networked "audiences" to land coveted positions in the industry's ranks? I was curious about the *experiences* of the (mostly) young women writing the blogs, uploading the videos, and posting to Instagram. Rhetoric aside, I wanted to know how they managed their enterprising ventures, behind the glossy filters and curated life-sharing. To what extent were their passion projects *paying off*?

I decided to ask them. Over a span of three years, I interviewed dozens of social media producers to make sense of their experiences and aspirations. What I found is that the narrative of creative self-expression—touted by the press and projected by the digital aspirants themselves—conceals the unrelenting work (much of it unpaid) that

takes place behind the screens. The "creative" activities of the women I interviewed were often purposeful and resolute: content was fashioned to be *on-brand*, posts were timed to coincide with spikes in platform usage, and feedback from followers was monitored with vigilance. The enterprising young women I spoke with framed their blogs and feeds in *employability* terms as much as, if not more than, self-expression. Most saw themselves—to borrow business guru Tom Peters's label—as the "CEO of Me, Inc."

These content creators, I came to realize, were motivated by the wider culture's siren call to *get paid to do what you love*. But what they experienced often fell short of the promise: only a few young women rise above the din to achieve major success. The rest are un(der)-paid, remunerated with deferred promises of "exposure" or "visibility," even as they work long hours to satisfy brands and convey authenticity to observant audiences. A grueling balancing act is required, one that I explore through the lens of "aspirational labor."

One of the goals of the book is to challenge the glowing optimism of techno-enthusiasts; it should thus be read as a rejoinder to cheering media accounts of social media entrepreneurship. Indeed, despite their buzzy headlines, articles on "Instagram Users Earn[ing] Thousands for a Single Post" or "Bloggers Turning Social Savvy into Six-Figure Incomes" fail to resonate with the lived experiences of those I studied. With this discrepancy in mind, it was important that the book allow content creators to speak in their own voices. And so I conducted fifty-six in-depth interviews with fashion and lifestyle bloggers, video bloggers (or vloggers), do-it-yourself (or DIY) fashion/jewelry designers, participants in fashion networking sites like the College Fashionista program, and street-style photographers, among others. A full list of my interviewees and other details about the interview process are available in the book's appendix.

Some of the aspirants I met over the course of this project were college students or newly minted graduates trying to stand out in an overcrowded employment market. Others were members of the "slash generation," individuals in their twenties and early thirties whose worker identities span multiple professions. For example, Danielle was a pharmaceutical sales rep/style blogger, Christie was a hairdresser/jewelry designer, Julianne was a PR representative/blogger, and so on. Some commentators, such as *New York Times* writer Sheila Marikar, argue that these hybrid professional lives are pursued for creative rather than economic reasons. But my research shows that many slashies are not merely trying to escape the banality of their "day jobs"; rather, they are trying to earn incomes from their so-called passion projects in the midst of a labor market that is rife with uncertainty.

In addition to individual interviews, I met my sources at a wide range of events—from formal industry conferences to more casual meetings of bloggers and social media pros. The former included the Women Get Social "Boot Camp" for bloggers; the annual Fashion-Forward conference; the Philly Tech Week Fashion Blogger's event; and the "Fun, Fearless, Life" weekend produced by *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Each of these events provided me with access to leaders in social media, fashion, and advertising as well as the chance to connect with those aspirants getting steeped in the culture of social media analytics, influence, and self-branding. In addition, I conducted fieldwork at informal events during New York Fashion Week and retail launches led by and for bloggers. To understand the ways in which digital media producers are socialized into the aspirational labor force, I drew upon a diverse series of blogger manuals and professional resources, including books (*Fashion 2.0: Blogging Your Way to The Front Row; Blog, Inc.: Blogging for Passion, Profit, and to Create Community*), thematic career manuals (*Teen Vogue Handbook: An Insider's Guide to*

Careers in Fashion), online networks and support groups (the Independent Fashion Bloggers network), and career guidance included in the blogs/vlogs themselves.

By weaving together interview data, field notes, and analyses of various texts—and drawing on writings from media studies, sociology, and gender studies—the book foregrounds the neglected dimension of gender in debates and theories of creative labor in an age of social media. And while I take seriously the "passion project" narratives of many young female content creators, I also draw out some important contradictions in their self-descriptions: between amateurism and expertise, between authenticity and strategic self-branding, and between internal drivers and external demands. Through the framework of *aspirational labor,* these women come to resemble the traditional media workers (journalists, producers, videographers) they have defined themselves against. And their roles come across as traditional in a second, gendered sense: the bloggers and social media users, I argue, end up reaffirming the already-tight bond between consumption and femininity.

In the end, I hope this book proves valuable for scholars, students, educators, and aspirational laborers themselves. And despite the book's emphasis on distinctly gendered work, it is meant to offer a lens through which to understand, anticipate, and critique larger transformations in the so-called "gig economy." Despite the rousing assurance that anyone can stand out among the inflated supply of workers, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love* pushes all of us to reconsider the stakes of social media production and promotion.