

Ordinary Outsiders: Transnational Content Creation and the Reclamation of Agency by
“Foreign” Women in South Korea

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Abstract

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This project explores the online content and lived experiences of “foreign” women who create social media content about their lives in South Korea. The commercialization of social media has led to increased pressure to commodify everyday life. The culture that has emerged on platforms like YouTube and Instagram is one that normalizes turning people into brands, rewarding creators who strategically package their lifestyles and align themselves with corporate sponsors. In the age of the online entrepreneur, it is no longer shocking to hear about a YouTuber whose livelihood is rooted in producing videos about beauty, fashion, food, health, or travel. Flourishing from the neoliberal age of social media “influencers,” scholars have offered both celebratory tales of participatory culture and thorough critiques of platforms’ co-optation of users’ labor. However, absent from these conversations is a transnational perspective that considers the ways in which content creators with relatively small audiences carve out spaces

that resist the capitalist imperative to constantly commodify and monetize. For the women whose experiences inform this dissertation, content creation can be emotionally, personally, and interpersonally meaningful in ways that help them navigate the challenges of being a woman online *and* being a foreign woman in South Korea. Through textual analyses of vlogs (“video blogs”) and interviews with creators, I demonstrate the ways in which some creators prioritize community-building, storytelling, and the creative process over quantifiable measures of “success.” Rather than rendering their experiences with Korea/n culture as exotic or exceptional, these women use social media to emphasize the ordinary. While these individuals continue to create within a global platform ecosystem that incentivizes consumption, commodification, and competition, their social media participation serves as an affective mode of transnational communication. For foreigners who are outsiders in the eyes of the state, social media can be a site at which to reconstitute notions of belonging and reclaim agency.

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Introduction

On August 28, 2013, I arrived at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, South Korea.¹ Equipped with the knowledge I had gained while at Yonsei University in 2012, my second time living in Seoul was one of the most transformative experiences of my early twenties. I met lifelong friends, spent nights out drinking and dancing till dawn, went on dates all over the city, and worked as a private English tutor, all while documenting my experiences as an international student on a public Wordpress blog. I had already been an avid writer on a semi-private Livejournal, which I used as a site to express my unbridled excitement about Korean popular culture and to build a network of other English-speaking fans, so blogging felt natural. And regardless of its publicness, I had no hesitation about putting my life online; like so many other women I observed sharing snippets of their lives on blogging platforms, I was eager to share my experiences with anyone who was interested.

This dissertation is grounded in the experiences of women who create social media content about their lives as “foreigners”² in South Korea. My research, which examines both vlogs (“video blogs”) and interview testimonials, makes significant contributions to the interdisciplinary body of work on social media content creation.³ Not only do I consider the benefits of creative work done by *micro*-bloggers/vloggers (i.e., individuals with very small audiences and whose social media has a limited reach), but I also provide a transnational

¹ “South Korea” and “Korea” will be used interchangeably throughout the dissertation.

² I use the term “foreigner” (외국인/*oegugin/waegukin*) throughout this dissertation as a direct translation of the term used for non-Koreans (specifically those who are visibly non-East Asian) in Korea(n).

³ “Content creation” is a broad term that reflects the production and publishing of anything online that might qualify as “user-generated content,” or that which is not produced by mainstream media industries. Depending on the popularity of the creator, there might be additional editors or producers involved in video production, Instagram posts, etc., and creators may be affiliated with an intermediary management team. However, the individual is still central to their personal “brand” they have created online. My use of the term “content creators” - rather than influencers or micro-celebrities - is detailed later in this Introduction.

perspective that is still largely absent and under-theorized in studies of digital/social media and user-generated content. Additionally, through an interrogation of the intersections of gender, culture, and national identity as they emerge through YouTube videos and in creators' everyday lives, I provide insight into the ways in which social media *can* and *is* used in ways that are not always "productive" within the scope of platform imperatives to commodify, compete, and monetize. That is, while the simplistic, the emotional, the slow, the relational, and the aesthetic aspects of content creation may not be condoned by capitalism, they make our lives richer.

This work builds on that of scholars who have studied "influencers" (Abidin, 2015, 2016, 2018; García-Rapp, 2016, 2017), "micro-celebrities" (Senft, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2013), and those who have insisted on creator-centered approaches to studying the social media industry (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Craig & Cunningham, 2019). It offers what the tech industry ethos of incessant innovation and capitalist marketplace logic does not: a slowing down to consider process over product. While the tech industry was in part built upon a view of the Internet as a democratizing force, Alice Marwick (2013) points out that "social media positioned capitalism to be an agent of social change without challenging underlying inequities" and the (White, male) entrepreneur became revered as the ideal-citizen subject. Feminist media scholars have echoed this critique of inequity online, highlighting how hierarchies based on embodied identity are reproduced in online spaces (Nakamura, 2008, 2013) and the ways in which algorithms perpetuate gendered and racialized oppression (Noble, 2018).

Debates surrounding digital labor have continued to surface with the "platformization" of society; our increasing dependence on platforms results in an asymmetrical distribution of power as users' data continues to be co-opted (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Platforms like YouTube, which thrive on constant flows of user-generated content, have become models of

individual empowerment and creativity (Burgess & Green, 2009). Yet, critical theorists have argued that creativity online is “the very source of exploitation,” as online platforms commodify and maintain power over their users (Fuchs, 2013). On the other side of the debate, others have celebrated the Internet as a space for “participatory culture,” or that which has “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some form of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 3).

Ultimately, I am ambivalent about platform participation. At the same time that they offer positive shifts in representation, spaces for artistic expression, and new opportunities for work and sociality, platforms always constrain the creative process (Duffy, Poell, & Nieborg, 2019). If an individual wants her story to reach those who would benefit from hearing it, she has little choice but to package and publish it on a platform that permeates international borders and in a way that will ensure its visibility. The lack of choice and control users have when it comes to their uses of social media makes me weary of notions like participatory culture, which can be overly celebratory, sidestepping the realities of the commodification of users and their content.⁴ However, my focus on day-in-the-life vlogs, casual conversations, and creators with small audiences provides insight into phenomena that exist before and/or in spite of commodification. That is, foreign women in Korea (or virtually anyone, anywhere) are able to leverage social media platforms to communicate with and cultivate audiences all over the world through their own means of creative, self-expressive, and often highly visual storytelling. These aspects of online participation emerged as significant benefits in my conversations with content creators,

⁴ Not to mention even more insidious aspects of the Internet, like hate speech and the rise of the alt-right, or the severe exploitation of workers in the gig economy and/or big tech. While these notions are far outside the scope of this dissertation, it is important not to lose sight of both what fuels and what can result from our everyday uses of the Internet.

most of whom were well aware of the negative aspects of social media, but who still continue to share their lives online.

By weaving together literature from multiple disciplines and combining textual analysis and qualitative interviews, this dissertation provides insight into a mostly untouched topic (that is, foreign “lifestyle” creators in Korea) and takes seriously the (at times mundane) lived realities of women whose content fosters transnational connections. My work adds to conversations about gender and digital labor, specifically those that have been fleshed out by scholars such as Brooke Erin Duffy (2015, 2016, 2017) and Crystal Abidin (2015, 2016), while it also offers new directions in research on content creation; by considering content creation from a transnational perspective, this project asks how the meanings of racial, national, and cultural identity shift as media flows across borders. While acknowledging the numerous constraints and challenges women face, as their presence in Korea as visible “outsiders” provides various privileges *and* disadvantages both online and offline, I focus on the emotional, personal, and interpersonal benefits of social media production/consumption. Ultimately, I argue that, understood as an affective mode of transnational communication, digital content creation can undermine the capitalist imperatives of consumption, commodification, and competition. This is especially the case for content creators whose audiences are relatively small, and who prioritize community-building, storytelling, and the creative process over quantifiable measures of “success.” Additionally, for foreigners in South Korea, who are irrevocably outsiders in the eyes of the state, social media can also be a site at which to reconstitute notions of belonging and identity to become rooted in multiplicity and difference.

Prefacing my analyses, the following sections of this introduction provide a foundation for the rest of the dissertation. First, I situate my research within media studies scholarship that

focuses on influencers, micro-celebrities, and/or content creators, gender, and digital labor. I discuss the ways in which neoliberalism has been theorized as the guiding logic of content creation and how women in particular pursue “authentic” self-presentation on social media. As with other forms of ostensibly “unproductive” labor, women’s participation on social media has been linked to emotion. I also explore the relevance of emotion and the body in production/consumption, and as such, the next section provides a brief overview of how I conceptualize “affect” throughout my dissertation. The next section clarifies my use of the term “transnationalism” and how I approach my work through a transnational lens. This lends itself to a brief discussion of Korea as an exemplary site at which to explore the global flows of media, as well as the shifting meanings of “foreign” identity. Finally, I describe my methodology and provide details of my research protocol. The methodology section ends with a brief overview of each chapter.

Self-Presentation on Social Media: Documenting the “Authentic” Self

This project focuses on small-scale content creators who identify as women and who use blogging platforms, Instagram, YouTube, and/or Twitter to maintain an online presence about their everyday thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences. Since the inception of my research, media and communication scholars had already started exploring public figures on social media and their roles as entrepreneurs, storytellers, celebrities, and makers of community. As a rapidly changing industry, social media participation is a challenging area of inquiry, but the cultures that form online reveal much about who we are. Women in particular have been “at the forefront of transforming personal life into a source of monetization” (Gill & Kanai, 2018, p. 320), leveraging platforms to express themselves, and vlogging, as a less scripted mode of communication, allows women to connect with others in more intimate ways.

With the affordances of platforms, “ordinary” individuals all over the world have been able to create engaging content that reveals aspects of their real lives and cultivates community. As a platform ostensibly committed to its “broadcast yourself” ethos, YouTube has played a core role in the rise of everyday creative practices by ordinary individuals who are able to leverage their visibility to gain a loyal following (Burgess & Green, 2009). While YouTube has no shortage of content covering nearly every topic, my interest in vlogs as a primary data source stems from the format’s association with the (planned or otherwise) candidness of real life, interactivity with the audience, and vloggers’ need to be legibly “authentic.” For over ten years, I have been an avid consumer of relatively mundane vlogs of strangers’ lifestyles, and there is something to be said about the ways in which these videos evoke genuine connection across difference and distance.

As early as 2008,⁵ vlogs made up the majority of the most popular content on YouTube. Vlogs relied on “liveness, immediacy, and conversation,” Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) write, stating that,

The vlog reminds us of the residual character of interpersonal face-to-face communication...Not only is the vlog technically easy to produce...it is a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback...It seems that, more than any other form in the sample, the vlog as a genre of communication invites critique, debate, and discussion...It is this conversational character that distinguishes the mode of engagement in the categories dominated by user-created content from those dominated by traditional media. (p. 54)

Later described as not just a genre, but as a “core SME [social media entertainment] format” (Craig & Cunningham, 2019), vlogging is a mode of online self-presentation that allows individual creators to communicate directly with others (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010) and share aspects of their everyday lives. Vlogs are in part defined by their amateurism, and their

⁵ YouTube launched in 2005, and rapidly began to gain more traction as a streaming/sharing platform in the few years after.

rootedness in reality distinguishes them from most mainstream formats. While interactive by necessity, Maggie Griffith and Zizi Papacharissi (2010) have argued that vlogs are “not intimate” because they are “highly controlled presentations” that are “a means to indulge narcissism.”

However, despite any strategicness of self-disclosure, public figures on social media *do* establish a sense of familiarity with their audiences that should not be dismissed (Marwick & boyd, 2011). For example, Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka (2018) argue for the productivity of “negative affect vlogs,” or highly-emotive videos in which YouTubers cry, share their struggles with anxiety, an/or confess difficult aspects of their personal lives. Characterized by vulnerability, these vlogs “operate as a primary site of the digital intimate public by exhibiting a potential for community-building through (interpersonal) connection and for self-reflection” (Berryman & Kavka, 2018, p. 95). Vlogging has also been a way for people from marginalized groups to intervene in the dominant narrative and share their stories; for transgender individuals, the vlog can be a “transformative medium for working on, producing and exploring the self” (Raun, 2015, p. 366), and Black women have taken up vlogging as a way to build community around self-care behaviors (Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019). Although vlogging centers the individual, to dismiss it as simplistic, frivolous, or narcissistic is to miss out on the ways in which sharing one’s authentic self online can be powerful and meaningful.

The notion of “authenticity” is integral to vlogging - or any digital presentation of one’s “real” life - but it is a contentious term. Since the early days of webcam confessions, authenticity has been a core component of social media culture; to be “authentic,” one must be perceived as open, honest, and “being true” to themselves and their audiences (McRae, 2017). In her foundational work on brand culture, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) points out how authenticity is now a market category. Brands, whether a corporate brand or a personal brand, have become

increasingly dependent upon emotional appeals, and it is through building an “*authentic*” relationship with a consumer - by telling stories, triggering memories, and evoking feelings - that brands often become successful (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Viewed in the scope of consumption, authenticity links the individual “to neoliberal capitalism and requires consistent labour, or self-work, to achieve and maintain its own authentic capital (Genz, 2015, p. 548). The commodification of authenticity has made an elusive quality into a prerequisite for personal branding; women on social media are then valued for the degree to which they are able to successfully perform “realness” and make it attractive to consumers (e.g., brands, corporate affiliates, ordinary viewers, etc.), while also ensuring that they are simultaneously relatable and aspirational. As Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai (2018) write, “confidence for women is required to be in a state of *becoming*, as to be fully self-confident is to put one at risk of failing to comply with other feelings rules of femininity” (p. 323).

The desire to be authentic emerged throughout my interviews with content creators, regardless of whether they created vlogs or stuck to writing blog posts. All of the women I spoke with relied on their personal experiences and perspectives to shape their online content, and they all discussed the ways in which they hoped to relate to their audiences. In her early work, digital ethnographer Crystal Abidin (2015) demonstrates how creators cultivate “perceived interconnectedness” with their audiences, a feeling of intimacy that emerges as lifestyle influencers share private details and mundane aspects of their lives. She points out that these intimacies are not related to whether or not the creator is truly “authentic,” but that they instead reflect the emotional impressions left on followers (Abidin, 2015). Rather than judging the extent to which content creators are truly and transparently sharing their real lives, I am more concerned

with how they perceive their own participation on social media, the ways in which they present themselves and their stories, and the impressions their productions can leave.

Commodifying Life Online: Neoliberalism, Gendered Labor, and Micro-celebrity

Following the work of Brooke Erin Duffy (2017), the aspects of social media production I examine - e.g., lifestyle content, vlogs/blogs, domesticity - are most often associated with and populated by women. As such, my focus on people who identify as women is intentional. In the time since platforms like YouTube and Instagram have become ingrained in structures of monetization, they have simultaneously become dependent upon typically feminized practices and behaviors (e.g., building and maintaining relationships, caring for the well-being of others, etc.). This has led feminist media scholars like Jacquelyn Arcy (2016) to argue for more research on the intensification of gendered labor online. Various scholars have made substantial contributions to this growing body of literature including those who have studied mommy blogs (Lopez, 2009; Chen, 2013), fashion blogs (Duffy, 2015, 2016, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Pham, 2015), Instagram influencers (Abidin, 2014; Abidin, 2016), and beauty gurus (García-Rapp, 2018; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017). These feminized domains - including my focus on travel, tourist, and/or “expatriate”⁶ vlogs - all share an immersion in a neoliberal culture of self-branding, which promises women’s empowerment through productivity, individualism, and self-reliance (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

While “neoliberalism” has been somewhat overused in academic critiques of capitalist excess, Marwick (2013) observes, it can also be used to “indicate a form of governmentality, specifically the theory that the free market has become an organizing principle of society” (p.

⁶ Although, following arguments made by David Oh (2018), I do not use this term explicitly, but at times, vloggers have referred to themselves as expats.

12). Contemporary neoliberal society celebrates the entrepreneur, an individual who is self-sufficient, flexible, and constantly seeking self-improvement (Marwick, 2013). Neoliberalism's insistence on empowering the individual presupposes that all people are given equal opportunity (which we know is not the case), and that success is largely (if not solely) dependent upon the individual capacity for self-discipline and productivity. Rosalind Gill (2007) has suggested that women, who are required to perform their ongoing self-transformation to a greater degree than men, are positioned as the "ideal" neoliberal subject. Already expected to constantly monitor, manage, and optimize their appearances, women who curate a public social media presence are encouraged to then capitalize on their entire lifestyles. The commodification of everyday life can be understood as a form of gendered labor insofar as content creators (regardless of gender) are asked to view themselves and their lives as relatable and marketable, making content that appeals to the emotions of audiences and maintaining relationships with these audiences. As with corporate branding practices that seek to establish and sell lifestyles and ideologies (rather than simply products), self-branding calls for individuals to foster emotional relationships with their audiences/consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2012), an endeavor that has been historically feminized.

It is this culture of neoliberalism and gendered labor on social media that has given rise to the "micro-celebrity" phenomenon. In her critical ethnographic study of camgirls, Theresa Senft (2008) coins the term "micro-celebrity" through her examination of the performative practices of women who broadcast themselves online. She identifies this self-presentation as a brand in the attention economy that relies on "emotional labor," the strategic management of emotional states by workers in particular professions (e.g., flight attendants) to keep consumers satisfied (Hochschild, 1983). The laborious task of making connections with others online is now a prerequisite for public figures on social media, particularly those whose online presence is

grounded in “realness.” This shift toward the “real” is characteristic of the era of micro-celebrity. Micro-celebrity is both a “state of being famous to a niche group of people” as well as a behavior (Marwick, 2013), and can be understood as a response to the neoliberal imperative to view all aspects of life through market logic. Senft (2008) defines micro-celebrities as individuals who rely on digital technologies to “amp up” their popularity and whose niche “fame” comes from their ordinariness and the closeness they cultivate with their audiences. Being a micro-celebrity also “requires creating a persona, producing content, and strategically appealing to online fans by being authentic” (Marwick, 2013, p. 114). Any digital content producer with any audience size can be a micro-celebrity practitioner (Marwick, 2013), as long as they are perceived as relatable, authentic, and ordinary, and aim to sustain a consistent self-brand (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017).

It is both the notion of consistency - a tricky quality to manage when branding is applied to a human being - and the attraction toward fame and celebrity (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017) that serves as a point of departure for my research. Whether one has a public or private social media profile, we measure our “success” by the numbers of likes, comments, or followers we accumulate (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). For platforms, advertisers, and corporations, quantifiable engagement is a quick and easy way to determine individual worth. However, this only provides a partial perspective of the variation in lives lived online. The women I focus on in this dissertation do construct self-brands, but they are not actively (or at least, not obviously) seeking fame or celebrity, are often inconsistent with their uploads and self-presentation, and simply do not appeal to a large enough audience to garner more attention. While the notion of micro-celebrity puts into perspective the behavioral norms of “influencers” in the attention economy, the term “content creators” is more fitting in my work. Social media industry

researchers David Craig and Stuart Cunningham (2019) argue that both “micro-celebrity” and “influencer” carry pejorative weight (with the latter being outright rejected by creators). Instead, they use the term “creator,” defined as “commercializing and professionalizing native social media users who generate and circulate original content to incubate, promote, and monetize their own media brand on the major social media platforms as well as offline” (Craig & Cunningham, 2019, p. 70). While the women I spoke with were not always (if ever) seeking to commercialize or monetize their content, the term “creator” emphasizes the act of creation, rather than the potential impact they have on “consumers.”

Perhaps due to the engaging literature on micro-celebrity and headlines indicating shock and awe at video game streamers and beauty gurus becoming some of the wealthiest kids on the Internet, little detailed attention has been paid to smaller creators. This oversight is understandable; the free-for-all market of social media production is oversaturated, so choosing to focus on individuals with the most subscribers/followers makes sense in determining mainstream norms and genre trends. However, my own stumbling into the subscriber base of smaller YouTubers (and then watching some individuals’ lives unfold over 10 years) made me realize the importance of these communities rooted not in mainstream appeal or entertainment, but in affective engagement and intimacy. When I routinely type “youtube” into the address bar, and am notified immediately that someone I follow has posted a new video (just 24 hours ago, 10 hours ago, 56 minutes ago...), I am drawn to click without thinking. My intangible attachment to this individual - whether she lives in Seattle, London, Tokyo, or Seoul - repeatedly pulls me to her content, and I imagine others feel the same. Speaking to these impalpable feelings many of us experience in relation to media, the next section clarifies the ways in which I conceptualize

“affect” in my research before explaining my insistence on a transnational approach to cultural production and consumption.

Affect and Digital Discourse

At the center of the consistent processes of gendered labor and authentic content creation is the body, tied to other bodies through mediated communication. Social media - and the commodified world of social media *influencers* in particular, who often produce content in affiliation with companies - is often touted as “fake.” When I chat with people about my dissertation topic, they immediately steer the conversation in one of two directions: excitement about their favorite influencers or mild fascination with (and/or disbelief surrounding) the youth obsession with fake and frivolous celebrities.⁷ Regardless of judgments about what makes content “quality” or worthwhile - an argument I do not find particularly interesting - there is no doubt that digital/social media makes people *feel*, sometimes in ways that are impossible to articulate.

In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how content creation is an affective mode of communication. While affect theory spans various disciplines and has at times been theorized as pre-cognitive and non-representational,⁸ I consider affect to be embodied and social. Affect is both felt investment and embodied force; “affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body...[and that] can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability” (Siegworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1). Understanding affect allows us to identify how emotions have a particular intensity that does social and material work (Ahmed, 2004a). Beyond that, affect can

⁷ Or, in the case of my older relatives, a general lack of understanding what any of this means.

⁸ e.g., theories of affect discussed by Brian Massumi or Nigel Thrift.

also be considered as a social *practice*. In her pragmatic approach to emotion and affect in social research, Margaret Wetherell (2015) argues that,

affective practice is a moment of recruitment, articulation or enlistment when many complicated flows across bodies, subjectivities, relations, histories and contexts entangle and intertwine together to form just this affective moment, episode or atmosphere with its particular possible classifications (p. 160)

As a contextual and relational performance, affect helps constitute online communities based on sharing, belonging, and discursive practice (Döveling et al., 2018). In their discussion of “digital affect cultures,” or those that form community bonds through centralizing emotion online, Katrin Döveling and colleagues (2018) also point to the practical aspects of affect. Centralizing affect as cultural practice “allows us to take into account the cultural as well as situational differences in *doing* affect, the meanings attached to specific emotions, and the normative dimension inherent in normalized practices as the preferred way of doing things” (Döveling et al., 2018, p. 3). Their emphasis on globalization provides a framework for understanding the cultural practices of communities that figure themselves around content creators. Although Döveling et al. (2018) focus on global fan communities, they also centralize the discursive elements of digital affect cultures that help facilitate a sense of belonging. As a discourse analyst, Wetherell (2015) argues that affect cannot be detangled from everyday talk (and texts). Although discourse and affect have been viewed as oppositional - discourse being the conscious and deliberate, and affect the involuntary and pre-cognitive - discourse and affect are intertwined (Wetherell, 2012). By thinking about discourse in a practical light (as language-in-use), Wetherell (2012) argues that “distinctions between cognitive and non-cognitive, representational and non-representational, conscious and unconscious, language and the body become less and less clear-cut” (p. 53). This understanding of affect and its relationship to discourse highlights the complexity and messiness of meaning-making processes as they take place online/offline and transnationally.

A Transnational Approach to Cultural Production/Consumption

When people begin making online content about their lives abroad, it is not only the video of them visiting a new restaurant or the blog post informing others about how to get a visa that communicates multiple layers of meaning, but also their identities and the extent to which they “belong” in one place or another (online and offline). As such, I am also interested in the transnational flows of content creation. “Flow” here insinuates movement, continuous circulation, a steady stream of media, images, information, people, capital, and identities, while “transnational” captures a sense of the dialogical relationship between the global and local. It is not only that women worldwide are offered “more diverse content, greater opportunities to distribute their own material, the potential to attract audiences beyond their locality, and clearer avenues for monetisation than broadcast film and television” (Abidin & Brown, 2018, p. xiv). Our constant encounters and interactions with difference on social media have the potential to shift the ways in which we understand ourselves and our relationships with others.

Transnationalism is not a singular theory, but a set of processes (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). These processes neither negate the significance of the nation-state nor nationally-defined boundaries (physical or otherwise), but accentuate the global flows of information and consider the interconnections and asymmetries from a more localized perspective (Iwabuchi, 2002). Aihwa Ong (1999) uses the term transnationalism to refer to the horizontal and relational “conditions of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space” (p. 4), articulating how various global processes (e.g., migration, business networks, relocation, etc.) are embedded in political-economic forces. From this perspective, people’s everyday actions are considered in relation to power. Transnationalism has been used in numerous disciplines to capture a sense of moving “beyond” the state (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004), but this does not mean that state

power has been weakened (Ong, 1999) or that legal, geographical, and cultural boundaries no longer matter (Iwabuchi, 2002). Instead, a transnational framework requires that we attend to the ways in which the situated, local culture informs, and is informed by, the complex factors of the global (Shome, 2010) while also considering the material realities of race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, and/or citizenship.

Unlike the term “international,” which connotes relationships between state actors and national governments (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004; Vertovec, 2009), “transnational” is used to describe phenomena related to the global flows of individuals, social movements, groups, businesses, and any other non-state actors (Hannerz, 1996). Relatedly, while the term “globalization” speaks to increased social, political, and economic interconnectedness, especially that which is due to technological innovations, anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1996) rejects globalization as an all-encompassing term, arguing that we bring it “back down to earth.” To do so requires a consideration of local context *within* globalization, examining the interplay between global and local. Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) also proposes a rethinking of globalization, extending discussions of transnationalism to media and popular culture. Iwabuchi (2002) considers the intra-Asian flows of Japanese popular culture, identifying the extent to which Japan has successfully localized - or, “subtly indigenized” - Western cultural products. This process is an example of hybridity, a concept born out of postcolonial studies that “displaces our conception of clearly demarcated national/cultural boundaries which have been based upon a binary opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘the West’ and ‘the Rest,’ and the colonizer and colonized” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 65).

More recently, this discussion of hybridity, transnationalism, and popular culture has been extended to a Korean context. Beginning with the popularity of television dramas across

Asia in the late 1990s, the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*/ *한류*) surged worldwide by the late 2000s.

With social media at their disposal, scores of international fans - especially of Korean popular music (K-pop), but also K-dramas, reality and game shows, and e-sports/online games - were able to enjoy (and participate in the global discourse surrounding) Korean entertainment media. Dal Yong Jin (2016) calls this era “the new Korean Wave,” which is distinguished in large part by the popularity of Korea(n culture and cultural products) in the West, and he situates *Hallyu* as both transnational cultural production and transnational cultural flow (p. 17). Similarly, we can understand creative work produced by “ordinary” individuals (i.e., bloggers, YouTubers, etc.) that mixes cultures and traverses borders as being a distinctly transnational phenomenon. Not only does their digital content flow between cultures and nations, circulating among and receiving feedback from viewers around the world, but they retain their “original” identities, while also gaining new ones. That is, when one moves abroad, she does not (necessarily) lose her citizenship or revoke her heritage, but instead, begins to absorb local ways of being into her sense of self.⁹

In his analysis of YouTube comments on the depiction of White expatriates in Korea as xenophobic and racist, David Chison Oh (2018) argues that it is important to “complicate understandings of transnationalism to include the multiple directions in which migration occurs.” “Understanding White migrants’ reception and interpretations of place,” he continues, “can shed light on the ways that racial ideologies travel and are contained in local spaces” (p. 307). The women in this study are majority White and are all from Western countries.¹⁰ I recognize that the term “Western” carries the weight of binary divisions between West and East, however, I use the

⁹ This notion of multiplicity and integrating the “Other” into one’s sense of self is characteristic of a cosmopolitan subjectivity, the focus of Chapter Two.

¹⁰ National origin was part of the study design, but that eight of my nine interviewees were White was an unintentional result based on who responded positively to my recruitment email.

term “Western” as a shorthand way to collectively refer to my interviewees’ countries of origin.¹¹ Their experiences as women from the U.S. and Europe reflect the privilege that comes with race and/or nationality,¹² both on global (online) and local (in Korea) levels, while at the same time, all non-Korean individuals are treated as hypervisible “Others.” Of course, hypervisibility means different things for different migrants. When a Black American woman moves to South Korea and broadcasts her life to a global audience, her racial identity is imbued with additional layers of meaning; while Blackness is stigmatized as racially inferior in both the U.S. and Korea, it carries different social and historical weight.¹³ Employing a transnational framework to the study of content creation allows us to see how racialized identity shifts in meaning (both for creators and for audiences) as someone moves to other locations.

My choice to focus on Korea is partially a reflection of studying a context I know well from an outsider’s perspective. But Korea also carries a fraught history of occupation by imperialist superpowers that has resulted in continued struggles over the protection of racial, ethnic, and national identity. Namely, facing hostile assimilationist policies by the Japanese colonial regime from 1910-1945, Koreans established a national identity based on ethnic homogeneity as a means of survival (Lee, 2009). While strengthening a sense of unity and

¹¹ I also capitalize “White” when it is used to identify the race of an individual. The Associated Press made an official statement in 2020 to keep the term lowercase, avoiding the uncertainty around who is and who is not included in the category. There is also a legitimate point to be made in regard to the capitalization of White by white supremacist organizations. However, I follow sociologist and race scholar Eve Ewing, who writes: “When we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness — the things that it is, the things that it does — we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility.” While I am not necessarily set on capitalizing the term in all contexts, nor do I reject those who argue against it, capitalizing White in this particular study emphasizes the privilege this visible racial category evokes in the context of Korea.

¹² And to some extent, class. Although, this is not something disclosed in YouTube content, nor was it at all part of my interview protocol. Nevertheless, class carries privilege on both an individual level (how much money the person has/makes and even how brands judge their monetary worth) and a structural level (if someone is from a “rich” country like the United States, they will be viewed differently than if they are from a “poor” country).

¹³ Specifically, the violent history of enslavement and brutalization in the U.S., versus Korea’s buy-in to Eurocentric racialized hierarchies. “Black” was originally used in Korea to refer to Southeast Asian individuals (as a pejorative) and was later reinvented as “failure to modernize...was juxtaposed with failure of race” as Korean scholars in the 1890s-1930s subscribed to the notion that “white civilization” was inherently superior (Kim, 2015).

resilience among Korean people, ethnonationalism inherently excludes any and all outsiders from fitting comfortably in society. As the Korean government faced a labor shortage in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the influx of foreign workers began to disrupt the homogeneous makeup of the population. Since the early 2000s, there has been a dramatic growth in Korea's immigrant population. With the majority of migrants coming from other Asian countries (namely, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines), Korea's foreign population grew from roughly 210,000 in 2010 to 2.2 million in 2017 (Korean Immigration Service cited in Chung, 2020). As the number of foreigners in Korea continues to grow, studies of identity and transnationalism are crucial for understanding and reimagining how notions of belonging might be reconfigured. At the same time, foreigners from Western countries who make public content about their lives in Korea cannot escape the legacies of colonialism their presence carries, a point which I elaborate on in my Conclusion. However, in content that centralizes the ordinariness of daily life, Korea is not simply backdrop nor a space to be claimed, but instead, the "everyday" Korea is co-constructed through experiences - of viewing, filming, sharing, discussing - and through emotion. As creators cultivate intimacy with their audiences, they also facilitate audiences' relationships to Korea.

In the next section, I describe my methodology, detailing my critical and qualitative approaches to data collection, transcription, analysis, and ethics. After this focus on process, I briefly outline each individual chapter before contextualizing foreigners' experiences with and relationships to content creation in Chapter One.

Methodology

This dissertation is grounded in feminist methodologies and relies on both critical and interpretive approaches to studying communication. Interpretivism does not seek to determine causal relationships, but uses an inductive approach to theory-building and prioritizes a local understanding over generalizable explanation (Miller, 2002). Interpretivism seeks patterns within social behavior, often utilizes grounded theory that is produced systematically, and relies heavily on data, such as that produced from ethnographies and interviews. To complement this paradigm, my analysis of texts is informed by critical theory. While sharing interpretivism's rejection of objectivity, critical theory diverges in its prioritization of values. That is, critical scholars do not just acknowledge the influence of their subjectivity on their research, but embrace it, arguing that values should drive scholarship. Critical work insists on attending to issues of power and ideology and views the production of knowledge as having emancipatory potential (Lather, 2004; Miller, 2002).

Historically, critical theory and cultural studies have had a fraught relationship with feminism, often overlooking interlocking systems of oppression and intersectional understandings of identity. For example, while Stuart Hall has greatly shaped work on hegemony, race, and representation, his analyses do not adequately attend to gender as a central factor in social life (Miller, 2002). Similarly, while Marxist perspectives on class inequities and subordination have massively shaped critical theory, they too need feminist theory to inform the impact of other facets of identity in social organization that cannot be removed from socioeconomic status. Guided by the work of feminist scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw and Gloria Anzaldúa, I consider the ways in which multiple identities interact to position particular individuals as more privileged or more marginalized than others. Additionally, following Donna

Haraway (1988), my analyses offer a partial perspective. Throughout my chapters, I practice reflexivity; I am transparent about my subjectivity and my own (and my participants') situatedness within our limited worldviews.

In describing the partial perspective, Haraway (1988) argues for a "view from the body," rather than a detached objectivity "from nowhere" (p. 598). As we move into online spaces, the body does not lose its significance; the Internet is always an embodied space (Daniels, 2009). Numerous critical new media scholars have emphasized the ways in which offline identities and lived realities translate to experiences online (Chun, 2013; Daniels, 2009; Nakamura, 2008), despite the persistent desire to characterize digital spaces as separable from the popular conceptualization of "reality." The salience of embodiment online comes through in my chapters, as I discuss modes of documenting and narrating one's life for an audience with whom they can connect on an emotional level. My own body and emotions are also imbricated in the processes of research and writing, informing the impact both texts and participants have on my being in the online/offline world.

Considering my participation in online spaces alongside content creators, and my prior experiences living in Korea, I take an ethnographic approach to Internet research. I have used multimodal critical discourse analysis to analyze my texts (YouTube videos) and I have conducted interviews with creators. I analyzed interview data by parsing emergent themes and creating corresponding codes; these codes were then refined through multiple readings of the transcripts and categorized into five predominant categories (detailed later in this section). Utilizing these complementary methods create a fuller picture of the value and meaning of content creation by foreign women in South Korea. My use of these two primary methods has resulted in two data sets: vlog-style videos across six YouTube channels and interview

transcripts from conversations with nine content creators. Implicit in my analysis is the understanding that these data - while technically made static through data collection and analysis - are apt to shift and change over time. It is the nature of online videos to disappear, to lose their relevance, or to gain new meaning as they are encountered at different points in time. Similarly, while my interviewees reveal numerous aspects of their lives that have been challenging as well as rewarding, their lives go on after our conversations and their views may change. Some of the women I spoke with have moved back to their home countries, for example, and may develop different perspectives on their time in Korea in hindsight. These are unavoidable limitations to online social research, but nevertheless my findings contribute to ongoing conversations surrounding creative work, identity, and the global reach of social media.

In the sections that follow, I discuss my research methods in further detail. First, I review ethics and Terms of Service, considerations that are especially crucial for scholars of online culture. Then, I explain my use of ethnographic methods, as well as my analyses of texts and interview data. Finally, I present some limitations of my work and suggest pathways for future research. This discussion is then followed by an overview of the dissertation.

Feminist Ethics and the Ownership of Data

Researching public online content (and the experiences of the individuals who create it) requires a careful consideration of best practices for data collection, anonymization, consent, and anticipating the future impacts of one's findings. Broadly speaking, my research process is guided by Brittany Kelley's (2016) "goodwill heuristic approach to online research methods" and Mary Elizabeth Luka & Melanie Millette's (2018) situated ethics of care. Kelley's (2016) work comes out of fan studies, and as such, she is concerned with how academics who utilize fan works from online sources in their research need to negotiate fans' concerns with privacy and the

conventional norms of fan spaces. Although I do not identify as a fan studies researcher, my work does frequently engage with fan studies literature and I believe that “a truly goodwill ethical positioning requires that we abdicate the throne of expertise and open ourselves to vulnerability” (Kelley, 2016, 4.10). This means that, even when I do not “reveal” myself as a researcher during online observation, I will not hold my own interpretations to be necessarily more significant or insightful than those of participants.

Also speaking of feminist ethics, Luka & Millette (2018) acknowledge the anxiety-induced demands of academia and constraints of both career and publication which naturally limit one’s ability to always adhere to their proposed thoroughness, and suggest at least keeping in mind their ethical principles. One of the most useful takeaways from this article is their concept of “speculation” as a method and as “a gathering of possibilities [that] establishes the researcher’s stance as one among many, sensitive to their own biases, power, and identity positions, thereby compelling each to unpack or even give up preexisting conceptual frames and labels (Luka & Millette, 2018, p. 5). By addressing the speculative quality of Internet research, their position meshes well with Kelley’s (2016) in that both emphasize the unavoidable situatedness of research and acknowledge the multiple viewpoints from which one can address a particular research question or social phenomena. Speculation is especially important when doing empirical and/or big data research, which can often be easily detached from one’s subjectivity, but it is a useful concept to employ in qualitative and critical work as well.

It is not always possible to determine to what extent content creators understand the public status of their contributions to platforms. Researchers have the responsibility to recognize how their use of online data can potentially reflect upon and effect their “participants,” especially when Internet users likely do not anticipate their online lives being used for research purposes.

The boundaries between public and private are blurry online, and any information used for research has the possibility of being traced back to individual users (Sugiura et al., 2017). One way to mitigate this is through anonymization, which I have done for my interviewees. To avoid potentially identifying my participants, I have only included minimal personal details (e.g., countries of origin, age, gender) which are necessary for contextualizing their experiences in Korea and online. However, I have not anonymized the work of those creators whose vlogs I analyze in Chapters Two and Three. This is in part due to the improbability of doing so, since their online personas and personal details are so integral to their online presence. By not anonymizing video content, I am also able to attribute the creative work to the proper authors. That said, I still contacted all six of these individuals at the inception of my study to inform them of my work and provide them an opportunity to opt out. However, as other scholars dealing with public figures have likely experienced, I received no confirmation of their receiving my emails (with the exception of Cari who showed interest in also being interviewed, but who never followed up).

Beyond making ethical decisions surrounding anonymization and the protection of participants, platforms also carry their own Terms of Service that can shape the ways in which data is collected and/or presented. For example, in their work describing the ethical challenges of publishing social media data, Libby Bishop and Daniel Gray (2017) note that - at least at the time of their work - Twitter's terms and conditions actually *required* a *lack* of anonymization of published Tweets. While this is likely intended to protect intellectual property by giving credit to the Tweet's original creator, it means that the researcher must negotiate legal compliance and the risks in not anonymizing data. This is a rather unique challenge of online research and requires

that researchers understand the technical, legal, and cultural specificities of each individual platform and website.

YouTube's Terms of Service ultimately puts the onus on individual creators, stating that the user is responsible for all content uploaded onto the site. Google, as YouTube's parent company, collects and owns virtually all accessible user data. To avoid breaching Terms of Service, I have not collected any data otherwise unavailable to the public; this means that I have not downloaded entire videos for the purpose of research. By not downloading videos, I also do not possess a copy of videos that creators may want to rescind from public access on the platform. As of this writing, all videos that are described or featured in screenshots are still publicly accessible via the YouTube channels on which they were originally published, but that is subject to change, as is the nature of online research.

Ethnographic Approaches to Internet Research

This dissertation relies on an ethnographic approach to Internet research. Traditionally, ethnography is a cross-disciplinary method applied to physical settings and generally requires that the researcher spend an extended amount of time in an unfamiliar place as a participant observer, taking detailed observational field notes and coming to conclusions through a grounded theory approach. Ethnographers aim to make explicit the often overlooked ways in which people live their lives. Extended to online spaces, *virtual* ethnography can be used "to develop an enriched sense of meanings of the technology and cultures which enable it and are enabled by it" (Hine, 2000, p. 8). Online ethnography shares many of the qualities of offline ethnography, including experiential knowledge through participant observation over an extended period of time (Abidin, 2015; Wilkinson & Patterson, 2010); it provides a way of seeing through the eyes

of participants, observing (and interacting with) these individuals within spaces in which they naturally engage (Hine, 2000).

Unlike other ethnographies of social media, such as Florencia García-Rapp's (2018) digital ethnography of YouTuber bubzbeauty which focuses on identifying community norms, I have no discernable field site with which I have regularly engaged. Because I am more interested in creators' representation of identity, nation, culture, and affect, their self-presentation, and their relationship to content creation, I have instead selected a corpus of online texts and conduct semi-structured interviews. These choices allow me to focus on creators, rather than the more expansive communities and the norms that form around them; this project is not concerned with longitudinal trends or defining broader cultures of social media, so keeping a static and manageable data set was the best way to be able to maintain focus, and return to and engage deeply with the data.

Despite inconclusive definitions of what "counts" as an ethnographic research project, I borrow a number of approaches that fit within the scope of ethnography. While I have not spent time living amongst the specific communities that emerge surrounding every creator whose content informs my work - in large part because that would not answer my research questions - I have "lived" on YouTube as a subscriber to other lifestyle vloggers for over ten years. My experience as an avid and regular viewer of women's lifestyle, diet and exercise, fashion, and day in the life videos in the past decade gives me insight into the expectations and emotional draw of this genre of content. As I have mentioned in my Introduction, I have also blogged regularly as a member of the international K-pop fandom (2009-2011) and as a White woman living abroad in South Korea (2012-2013), and spent my late teens and early twenties on social media, meeting people like me from all over the world. These perspectives allow me to provide

insight into the meaning-making of content creation that is largely absent from the communication and media studies literature, and offer a more user-/creator-centered view.

While some scholars like Senft (2008), who practiced webcamming while studying camgirls, have been active participants in the worlds they study, most academic researchers possess a degree of “outsiderness” that can be both limiting and beneficial. Although I am an avid viewer and have been a casual blogger, I have never maintained a public online presence, nor have I lived in Korea for more than six months at a time. While I discuss the downsides of these perspectives in my limitations section later in this chapter, being an outsider to these worlds can also be advantageous. By maintaining some degree of objectivity and having access to academic resources (e.g., access to scholarship, training in analytical methods), I provide a critical lens through which to understand content creation and how it fits into broader social, economic, and historical contexts. My outsider status also allows me to think through issues, such as the tourism industry’s reliance on “authentic” social media production or the origins of Korea’s migrant visa system, that may otherwise be taken for granted by participants themselves.

Like with fieldwork, memo writing was integral in all stages of my research process, including data collection and transcription, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and developing theory. Some memos were brief reflections on my reactions to interviews or watching a video, while others were longer, stream-of-consciousness analyses of data. I wrote memos regularly from 2019-2021 after each interview, while I was watching vlogs for the first time, and as a way to organize my thoughts while reading relevant literature and synthesizing my findings. This resulted in over 300 pages of both digital (Google Docs) and analogue (two handwritten journals) documents. My memos varied in length, were written 3-5 times per week, and their content changed depending on the stage of research; when I began the interview

process, for example, I took notes on my frustration with soliciting participants, as well as after my initial observations and reactions to conversations. These latter memos were particularly useful, as I observed the directions in which my interviewees guided our conversations and could adjust my interview style accordingly. An excerpt from October 23, 2019 reads:

My interviews have gone fairly smoothly so far, and all participants have been eager to answer my questions. It does seem that we tend to slip into discussing quite a bit about their experiences as foreigners in SK, with maybe less attention than I was originally anticipating paid to the experiences as foreign CREATORS in SK. Some of this is due to the popularity/motivations - particularly for bloggers - as those who do not monetize content or “owe it” to audiences to consistently produce might feel like the creation aspect is less a part of their lives - just a side note to their main jobs and life trajectory.

When developing my interview questions, I had not anticipated the relevance of monetization and how that might shape creators’ relationships with their audiences, but this turned out to be a significant finding. In another excerpt, I asked questions regarding my observation of the popularity of videos filmed “in homes/apartments/airbnbs + airplanes/airports” and my finding that interviewees’ audiences kept asking them to film apartment tours. On January 27, 2020, I wrote:

What is it about being let in someone’s home - especially these intimate spaces in another country - that draws us to these videos (and in turn, these individuals)? What is it about having a fuller view of the travel process that gets views? These airplane/airport vlogs serve as kind of tutorials, so does that mean it either encourages people to travel to Korea smoothly, or does it discourage them from feeling the need to travel at all via living vicariously?

Memo writing helped shape my arguments and allowed me to move iteratively between the data and the literature to generate theory.

Finally, throughout this dissertation I take into consideration the social and material aspects of platforms and the cultures that emerge through their use. I acknowledge the influence of material constraints on social behavior and recognize that digital methods must follow the functions of platforms insofar as they structure communication (Caliandro, 2018). For example,

YouTube presents its users a set of material constraints and affordances through which to operate, and its monetization structure, paired with the YouTube Partner Program and the various investments of large corporations, situates all YouTubers within a particular capitalist system. With this in mind, I consider online social formations and users' self-presentations within - and entwined with - the structures of the platforms (Caliandro, 2018).

Textual Analysis: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

The textual analyses woven throughout this dissertation are pulled from six primary content creators. This sample was intentionally diverse, incorporating not just the most measurably popular creators who fit my criteria, but three “tiers” of individuals whose subscribership ranged from 40K-310K at the time of finalizing my sample. Ultimately, I arrived at the following: “top” tier, ~230-310K subscribers (whitneybae vlogs (Whitney), Farina Jo), “mid” tier, ~120-150K subscribers (cari cakes (Cari), kali lowe (Kali)), and “low” tier, ~40K subscribers (“Hijabi in Seoul City” (Iman), “DearSeoul” (Rachel)).^{14 15} These creators are all young, non-Korean women from Western countries whose online content is heavily reliant on both presenting their “real” selves/lives while working in, traveling to, and/or studying in South Korea. Their channels have fluctuated in viewership over time, as have their lives as some have moved away from Korea, while others seek more opportunities within the country, yet all maintain *some* online presence, even though the nature of online content is to shift, change, and unfortunately, disappear.

¹⁴ These subscriber counts have all slightly changed since data was collected in late 2019. I also recognize that Farina Jo is now a notable outlier, as her YouTube channel surpassed one million subscribers in 2021. However, because my sample was pulled from videos that were posted prior to her reaching greater YouTube fame, the arguments made in relation to the benefits of smaller audiences are still relevant. Farina's content also grew to center primarily on her relationship (numerous “couples” tag videos and using the word “boyfriend” in most video titles) and her lifestyle, rather than specifically Korea- or K-pop-related content. The evolution of one's content and online persona is an inevitability that researchers should be aware of and explicit about in social media research.

¹⁵ Vignettes for these creators can be found in Appendix A. These vignettes serve as short narratives reflecting the online personas of each creator.

To unpack the layers of meaning within these videos, I rely on Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's (2001) initial framework for multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), a method that considers meaning to be infused with power relations and understands language as non-neutral (Gibson et al., 2015). It not only focuses on the existence of multiple modes of communication and representation, but also considers the interplay between them (Pauwels, 2012), and always constitutes and is constituted by social action (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The inherent multimodality of digital spaces requires that researchers are able to take into account the interactivity between modes of representation, considering both the material constraints and affordances, as well as more semiotic and aesthetic elements. Because I am concerned with issues of power, identity, and representation, my approach is also grounded in critical theory. A critical approach to MDA acknowledges the power dynamics that shape/inform all communication, emphasizing the "how," rather than just the "what" (Machin & Mayr, 2012), and critiquing "how societies produce and perpetuate social wrongs, and how people seek to remedy or mitigate them" (Fairclough, 2010 [1995], p. 7). The combination of modes in any one text suggest "particular versions of social reality that are not neutral with regard to power: they serve some interest while marginalizing others" (Jancsary et al., 2016).

I finalized my video sample in October 2019 (N=111),¹⁶ which reflected the top twenty¹⁷ most popular "vlog" style videos¹⁸ by each creator. Guided by education researcher Ashley Patterson's (2018) qualitative work relying on YouTube content, I collected links to videos to

¹⁶ Finalized video sample detailed in Appendix B

¹⁷ Ideally, my sample would have included nine more videos, however, DearSeoul did not end up producing enough videos that might qualify as in the vlogging or lifestyle genres to sample nine more. (Her halting content creation was due in part to a "scandal" discussed briefly in Chapter Four). That said, I still argue that her channel is a good example of this type of content creation and is one of the few that has beyond 40K subscribers.

¹⁸ This included videos explicitly marked "VLOG" by creators, but also incorporated any videos that showed some aspects of their everyday lives and routine behaviors and captured what I would categorize as "lifestyle" genre. This does not include videos like makeup tutorials or "challenge" videos, but does include room tours (see: Chapter Two) and advice-based videos (e.g., what to wear, where to eat, etc.).

return to them when necessary, while also detailing numerical and temporal data (date published, number of views, etc.) organized on spreadsheets (see: Figure 1). These spreadsheets were also inspired by the work of Florencia García-Rapp (2018) whose archival YouTube fieldwork on beauty guru bubzbeauty's YouTube channel resulted in the creation of an “audit trail” of data, coding stages, and instruments; an audit trail accounts for the decisions made by the researcher and meaningfully advance data analysis (García-Rapp, 2018).

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Title	Date	URL	Viewership	Comments	Keywords
2	My \$230/Month Korean Room // GOSHIWON TOUR 🇰🇷	2018 Mar 20	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVSs7Gk28yk	3.1M; 59K(L), 1.3K(DL)	4274	["goshiwon", "goshiwon seoul", "goshiwon korea", "goshiwon sinchon", "goshiwon hongdae", "goshiwon tour", "goshiwon room tour", "korean room", "korean room tour", "korean apartment", "sogang university", "ehwa university", "yonsei university", "korean school", "south korea", "korea vlog", "seoul", "고시원", "life in korea", "2018 room tour", "goshiwon 2018"]
3	FIRST DAY AT A KOREAN UNIVERSITY 🇰🇷 // Korea Abroad	2018 Mar 14	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkR0kIMO5OQ	835K; 31K(L), 906(DL)	2397	["korea", "sogang university", "university in korea", "korea abroad", "study abroad korea", "living in korea", "first day at a korean uni", "sogang klec", "black in korea", "korean exchange", "study abroad", "yonsei university", "ehwa university", "korea vlog", "korean study", "kpop", "korean class", "korean school", "korean vlog", "first day in korea", "university in asia", "bts", "goshiwon", "korean uni", "seoul university", "korean subway", "vlog in korea", "first video", "korea university", "south korea", "seoul"]
4	my korean self study routine	2018 Nov 16	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8Md7bAnJIQ	359K; 17K L, 268 DL	1014	["korean", "korean study", "korean study routine", "study routine", "study with me", "talk to me in korean", "think", "study plan korea", "my korean study routine", "sogang university", "ehwa womens university", "yonsei university", "korea", "korean vlog", "vlog 2018", "bts", "taehyung", "blackpink", "blackpink jennie", "japanese", "seoul vlog", "study with me korean", "how to study korean", "kall", "study korean language", "hangul", "study korean in korea", "study korean playlist", "study motivation"]
5	a day in my life in korea	2019 Mar 23	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOsjnmBVdzM	346K; 14K L, 132 DL	814	["a day in my life in korea", "life in korea", "living in korea", "seoul vlog", "korea vlog", "korea 2019", "day in the life of a korean student", "korean university", "kall", "day in the life korea", "korean school", "sogang university", "yonsei university", "ehwa university", "hongdae", "hongdae shopping street", "korean host family", "korea vlog 2019", "bts", "blackpink", "jungkook", "m", "jennie", "kpop", "korean youtubers", "korean skincare", "korean glass skin", "have a productive day with me", "study korean"]

Figure 1: Screenshot of spreadsheet used to track video data

After capping this strategic sample, I turned toward the challenge of collecting and analyzing “live” data systematically, while also being reasonable and ethical. I chose not to download videos, following Patterson’s (2018) argument for selective transcription of videos as a means to respect both platform rules and any elective privacy measures taken by content creators. Although transcription is often “behind the scenes” of research, my focus on multimodality required that I determine which “modes” were most relevant to my work, though I would

ultimately analyze the live videos, rather than the transcripts themselves, as transcripts served as robust reference points, but did not fully capture the emotional, interactive, and narrative elements of vlogs. As “socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource[s] for meaning making,” modes all offer something different to the given communication event and are always simultaneously linked through material affordances and social work (Kress, 2010).

Ultimately, transcription for multimodal texts should, as Jeff Bezemer & Diane Mavers (2011) point out, foreground the agency of the transcriber and, like much qualitative online social research, will vary on a case-by-case basis. Their primary suggestion for consistency in multimodal transcripts is that modes should be separated out to be read in temporal succession so as to “reconstruct their composition” and demonstrate the “complexities of meaning making” (Bezemer & Mavers, 2011, p. 202). My transcription schema combines approaches by various MDA scholars (e.g., Bednarek, 2014; Kristensen, 2018) and I chose to highlight the specific modes and associated types of meaning I felt were most salient for constructing a cultural and personal lifestyle narrative for a particular audience of like-minded others on YouTube (see: Figure 2). These broad types of meaning include the representational (*i.e., who is doing what*), interactive (*i.e., regarding social relationships*), and compositional (*i.e., structure of the image*) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Guijarro & Sanz, 2008; Bednarek, 2014). More recently, scholars of multimodal texts have also suggested separation of “layers” of meaning which reflect specific modalities, such as the visible, audible, material, and emic layers (Kristensen, 2018). This framework is significant in that it acknowledges not just the representational whole of an image, but incorporates an embodied approach that relies on different sensory details.




	Representation	Verbal / Audible	Interactive	Composition
	Big open windows, looking out over city Cari - bed, stairs, pajamas Tea kettle Kitchen Toothbrush Table, mug	Music starts - soft, acoustic, bouncy guitar		1POV shot from above Still camera (tripod set up), 3POV shots as Cari moves about the apartment First minute, different shots in different parts of home, following Cari making tea, brushing teeth
	Cari sitting, left frame Kitchen + laundry + mirror mug	Music continues Hi guys! And welcome to this Daegu Korean apartment tour So, as most of you may know, I don't like in Daegu - I live in Seoul I'm staying at this wonderful Airbnb in the perfect area	Direct address and eye contact with gaze of camera Once sitting, in frame Body facing camera Verbal communication includes "you" and directives ("if you find that you really, really love this set up, you can find it in all other cities")	Shot transitions (cuts) to similar shot, but with Cari facing directly toward lens, more or less center of frame
	Floor Entryway feet/body mirror/reflection (Cari, iPhone camera) Dress Shoes in entryway Couch, windows Control panel (lights, etc.)	Music continues So when you enter you have the usual area for shoes, and this whole wall is storage Next we go in- and this is the living room area	 Mentions most furniture in apartment is from IKEA (presuming audience knows IKEA)	All aspects of entryway in frame, slow(ish) pans, each section in frame 1POV as voice from behind camera narrates Moves forward slowly, windows and large sectional couch in frame

Figure 2: Screenshot example of vlog transcription for CMDA reference point. These transcripts were not my data - as were the transcripts for my interviews - but rather, served as reference points and easily accessible visual and narrative notes.

Screen grabs were generally aligned with the most notable shifts in scene in each video, and/or notable time stamps. What I considered “notable shifts” depended on the individual video, but were usually significant changes in the environment, time between shots (i.e., juxtaposition of a shot in the classroom to a shot at a convenience store), or on occasion, the angle of filming (i.e., first person to selfie shot). I separated each individual YouTube video into 10-15 sections on average, ending with a total of 467 pages of visual/textual transcripts. This provided me with a starting point for in-depth analysis as it created visual timestamped reference points and multimodal layers to which I could return. My analyses thereafter were iterative, moving between the transcripts, live data, and literature, and considering how the interactive, compositional, and verbal aspects of the texts worked together to make meaning. The transcription process took a total of four months.

Chapters Two and Three reflect my analysis of textual data, specifically addressing two primary video categories shared by all six creators: tours of domestic space and “day in the life” vlogs. While interactive characteristics (e.g., visual (eye contact, body position) and verbal (“you guys,” “let’s,” etc.) direct address to audience) were incorporated into all videos included in my sample, these specific categories were chosen based on their popularity (on YouTube broadly, and based on these specific videos’ view counts) and because they speak to the everyday realities of living in Korea, even when they contain scripted elements.

Semi-structured Interviews with Content Creators

Although textual data can produce robust findings on their own, many new media scholars have argued for the benefits of triangulation. For qualitative research, triangulation insinuates the necessity for online methods to be *multiple* so as to better address the complexity of research questions. For example, communication researcher Maria Schreiber (2017) argues for the triangulation of methods when addressing analyses of visual, textual, and platform data. She advocates for both “going big” by utilizing ethnography and interviews, while also “going small” by looking at what is already there in depth (i.e., via textual analysis and close reading) (Schreiber, 2017). Additionally, critical research requires that one speak *with*, rather than just *to* or *for*, participants (Lather, 2004), so interviews with those who currently (or have recently) lived and worked in Korea as non-Koreans from Western countries allow me to avoid claiming a sole authoritative voice. As a critical and feminist scholar, I acknowledge and accept the ways in which my own biases shape the research process, however, including the voices of creators themselves alongside my readings of YouTube videos adds richer context I may otherwise overlook.

In October 2019, I contacted prospective participants who fit the following criteria: (1) identify as women, (2) are over 18 years old, (3) are from North America or Europe, (4) identify as non-Korean, and (5) have lived in Korea for some period of time and have cultivated a presence and following on a social media platform. This criteria reflects the qualities of the six creators whose content informed my textual analysis, but also included content creators who were not necessarily YouTubers (e.g., bloggers, Instagram users, etc.) as well as those who may have had relatively low followings. Because my criteria were so specific, I contacted forty-four total participants directly through formal recruitment emails that included a flyer I designed that advertised my research (see: Figure 3). I found these particular individuals' profiles through my own prior encounters on YouTube and/or Instagram and through general searches on social media platforms.¹⁹ Ultimately, I conducted interviews with nine individuals who fit my criteria (see: Figure 4). These were the only people of all those I contacted who responded positively to my recruitment emails and who also followed through with scheduling. Because I shared a similar gender identity, nationality, and age with my participants, as well as having prior experience studying in Seoul, we were able to communicate candidly, almost as friends, and they gave me insight into some of the more challenging aspects of their lives.

¹⁹ One of my interviewees was also someone I had met on Livejournal in 2010, and who I had hung out with in person when I was in South Korea both in 2012 and 2013. While we do not have a close relationship by any means, we did know each other previously, which shaped some of her responses during our conversation (for example, her acknowledging that I know certain things about Korea).



Figure 3: Recruitment flyer attached to emails to creators. I created this flyer to provide a more accessible and visual accompaniment to the description of my research. Recruitment emails also linked to my professional website (annaleeswan.com) and my personal Instagram (@hellorabbit) to simultaneously legitimize my position as a researcher and offer further transparency if creators wanted to follow me online. Three of my nine interviewees continue to follow me on Instagram, though I have not sustained direct contact with these individuals.

Name	National Origin	Age	Primary Platforms Used
Eva	Finland	29	blog, Instagram
Sofia	USA	30	blog, Instagram, YouTube
Taylor	USA	23	Instagram, YouTube
Brooke	USA	32	YouTube
Lucy	USA	26	Instagram, YouTube
Margaret	Germany	31	Instagram, YouTube
Elizabeth	USA	24	blog, Instagram
Hannah	USA	26	blog, Instagram
Elena	Czech Republic	21	blog, Instagram, YouTube

Figure 4: Interviewees' general characteristics at time of interview. Names listed are all pseudonyms.

I conducted interviews via Skype or Google Hangouts in the fall of 2019 in a semi-structured format. These interviews served as exploratory data, engaging with some primary

questions regarding their motivations for publicly sharing their lives online and their experiences living in South Korea. Interviews with content creators occurred in this early stage of my research process, in part so that my insights from the textual data did not inform our conversations. The questions I posed were intentionally general and open-ended, beginning with asking them to introduce themselves and to tell me about their time in Korea. All interviewees were then asked about their relationship to social media, how/why they started putting their lives online, and where they saw their content going in the future. They were also asked about their experiences with cultural differences and being a “foreigner” in South Korea.²⁰ Beyond those key topics, interviewees could direct the conversation in any way they saw fit, and I would ask probing and/or follow-up questions, while also sharing my experiences as points of comparison. Interviews lasted from 45-60 minutes, and the recorded audio was then transcribed via a rough transcription service. I then listened to all recordings again and edited transcriptions to ensure accuracy.

Following a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I relied on substantive and emergent coding. This process entails moving from open coding, during which data excerpts are highlighted and associated with short descriptive phrases, to the emergence of core categories into which excerpts are sorted (Holton, 2007). These categories were then re-shaped as I moved iteratively between theory generated by social media scholars and my data. I then conducted more selective coding, which is more focused and based on the emerging conceptual framework (Holton, 2007). I also used diagramming to inform the creation of storylines at various stages of the analysis process (Birks et al., 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 1990); specifically, my diagrams were sketches that helped me visualize the temporal shifts in content creators’ motivations (e.g.,

²⁰ See Appendix C for interview protocol.

creating to maintain connection → realizing public impact → creating to help others). My codes clustered around five major themes: defining content creation, creator-audience relationship, digital labor, meditations on the “foreigner” experience, and feelings about Korea/n culture/people. These themes are reflected in Chapters One and Four, which integrate interview findings alongside larger contexts of global social media platforms and Korean national culture and history.

Limitations

There are some limitations to my research that I will discuss prior to introducing the overview of my dissertation. First, I have already mentioned that there are both pros and cons to my insider/outsider positionality. While my insider statuses - as an avid watcher of YouTube and a previous international student - allow me to have a better grasp of the experiences of content creators and/or foreign women in Korea, they can make me overlook that which I consider “normal.” For example, I am so accustomed to the typical ways in which vloggers perform for their audiences (direct address, carrying their cameras around in public spaces, etc.), I might miss details that someone who never watches vlogs might find interesting or strange. Similarly, my outsider statuses - never curating a public social media presence and having only a limited purview of life as a White woman in Korea - prevent me from *truly* understanding others’ experiences and thus, my interpretative work can only go so far. Perhaps most significantly, I am not Korean, was not born in Korea, and have not spent great lengths of time in Korea. While my critiques of the national, political, economic, and cultural contexts are evidenced through academic research and the experiential knowledge of my participants, I do not make definitive claims about Korea/n culture. Similarly, my participants’ content and testimonials are also limited by their own partial perspectives. My dissertation offers a creator-centered and optimistic

view of transnational content creation that is produced by foreign women with relatively small audiences. To continue to enrich these discussions, more research is needed that presents different foci (i.e., examining the work of massively popular, mainstream creators; speaking with audience members of foreign creators; speaking with Korean vloggers/influencers) and that provides insight into alternative questions (i.e., to what extent do foreigners' representations of "elsewhere" have real, negative effects?). Finally, due to the dearth of research that specifically examines the *transitional* aspects of social media, future scholars should interrogate the vast ways in which media and meaning-making flows across borders.

Overview of the Dissertation

My chapters conform to the conventions of cultural studies scholarship, particularly that which is concerned with media. This type of research "aims at making connections between texts and contexts, media industries and technologies, politics and economics, and specific texts, practices, and audiences" (Kellner, 2009, p. 8). Feminist studies in particular has been credited with "bridging the humanities/social science divide by bringing literary categories and 'aesthetic' concerns to bear on social issues" (Johnson, 1986, p. 40). As such, my interview findings are not presented in a way that reflects traditional social science, but rather, they are integrated alongside and within larger social, cultural, and political contexts. In addition, throughout my chapters, I integrate some reflections on my own experiences watching YouTube, writing blog posts, and grappling with being a White woman in Korea. These reflections should not be interpreted as data, but as a demonstration of reflexivity, "self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher" (England, 1994, p. 244). As an academic interpreting and analyzing social lives and creative works as data, I have an unavoidably

asymmetrical relationship with content creators. But by practicing reflexivity, I attempt to diminish the hierarchy between researcher and “researched.”

Each chapter of this dissertation contributes to a larger overarching creator-centered narrative that regards content creation as a feminist/feminine, affective, transnational, and communicative process. Through my arguments and analyses, I identify the ways in which creative work on social media can meaningfully connect ordinary individuals across national and cultural borders, carving out spaces of belonging that sit on the periphery of external dictations of who fits in where (and how). That is, rather than insider/outsider distinctions that are dictated by the state (e.g., citizenship, race/ethnicity, visa status), societal norms, or market logic (e.g., whose identities or experiences are more desirable than others), ordinary users’ online content can provide alternative ways to connect with others. This story is grounded in the context of foreigners in Korea, but it also applies to other communities that emerge in and through uses of platforms that do not fully adhere to the pressures of commodification online. Even when ordinary individuals create a personal brand and/or align themselves with corporate sponsors, this does not necessarily diminish the personal value online content has for both creators and their audiences. What is “valuable” is not only that which is brandable, marketable, and profitable; value is also derived from social and emotional meaning. To illustrate how this occurs, I provide insight into the perspectives of creators (Chapters One and Four) and creative representations of life in Korea (Chapters Two and Three). As such, the dissertation begins and ends by centering women’s lived experiences, bookending the chapters that address online texts and signifying the incorporation of the online in our offline lives. Each chapter builds on the last to answer my overarching research questions: (a) How do foreign women use social media to represent their experiences in South Korea? (b) What is the relationship between creators,

audiences, and online content? and (c) To what extent is transnational content creation socially, culturally, and/or emotionally meaningful?

In Chapter One, I begin with a critical consideration of the contexts in which creators express themselves and communicate with others, while taking seriously the way they frame their own creative work. This chapter combines a literature review regarding tourism, nation branding, and the commodification of online content with interview findings that speak to foreign women's characterization of how their content works for them. In discussing the neoliberal logics of both global social media platforms and Korean state-led multiculturalism, I contextualize the landscape within which foreigners' content about life in Korea operates. Despite external pressures by industry and government to commodify and control non-Koreans' portrayal of their presence in Korea, my interviewees express the ways in which their content creation can be personally beneficial. Content creation is not always a means to an end, but a creative process of self-expression and self-making.

Departing from interview data, Chapter Two provides an analysis of a subset of vlogs: tours of domestic space. This chapter explores themes surrounding intimacy, hospitality, and cosmopolitanism and examines the relationship that is constituted between creators and their viewers. Tours of domestic space are some of the most popular and requested genre of YouTube video, particularly for individuals who are living in or traveling to other countries; while the texts in this chapter are not created by my interviewees, some of women I spoke with also mentioned how their most popular videos were tours of their apartments. Through my analysis of vloggers-as-hosts, I consider how foreign women in Korea present themselves as "new" cosmopolitan subjects who embody multiple identities simultaneously, rather than attempting to totally assimilate or reject one national belonging for another. By incorporating "otherness" into one's

self-definition, creators disrupt ideas of foreignness that continue to situate them on the periphery of society.

Chapter Three continues my focus on the situatedness of lifestyle content by analyzing the routine behaviors and mundane everydayness of “day in the life” vlogs. Generally filmed in a mobile, handheld, come-along-with-me style, these videos highlight the ordinariness of one’s life in Korea. It is through these videos that vloggers make this ordinariness something to be experienced vicariously through viewing; the process of vlogging aestheticizes the everyday. Through their performances of habitual behaviors, vloggers slow down to emphasize embodied processes of consumption - that is, consuming with the senses as opposed to the monetary consumption of material goods - and transmit feeling to/with their viewers. These seemingly simple daily vlogs are then characterized by continuous world-making, normalizing difference, nurturing collective feelings across national boundaries, and bringing audiences closer to the “real” Korea.

The final primary analytical chapter presents findings from interview data that speak to my participants’ experiences as foreign women from the U.S. or Europe living and working in South Korea. Because the majority of my interviewees are White, their racial and national identities grant them privilege that other minoritized individuals do not experience.²¹ Most of my interviewees acknowledged the meaning their Whiteness carried for them in a Korean context, while also confessing their frustrations with their inescapable outsider status and ascribed inferiority. For example, multiple women mentioned how their relationship with a Korean man may help legitimize their residence in Korea (e.g., if they get married, they can qualify for a visa more easily), but they also constantly experience treatment as only an extension of their male-

²¹ For example, Asia Bento (2020) discusses how African American women in Japan and South Korea become “involuntary spectacles” due to their hypervisibility.

identified partner, rather than an autonomous individual. This chapter situates experiences of outsidersness in the context of competing narratives of “foreignness” constructed by the mainstream media, social media audiences, the Korean government, and even other foreigners. Content creation then emerges as a practice which allows foreign women to express themselves, communicate with similar others, and ultimately, to control their own narratives.

My findings emphasize the positive and empowering potentials of transnational content creation, contributing missing pieces to ongoing conversations in media studies and communication. However, creators from the U.S., Europe, or Canada who make public content about their lives in Korea, modeling their lifestyles for a global audience, cannot entirely escape the historical weight of colonialism that their online/offline presence carries. As such, the Conclusion considers the legacies of colonialism that remain just buried beneath the surface of this dissertation, suggesting that more direct engagements with postcolonial theory would be well-suited to future research on transnational content creation.

Chapter One: Process versus Product: Understanding the Value of Transnational Content Creation for Institutions and Individuals

“I don't want to be pushed into...just one direction creatively. And that's what...unfortunately, a lot of influencers and bloggers fall into. And I don't want to fall into that trap.”

(Interview with Sofia, November 3, 2019)

This chapter takes seriously the ways in which women define and approach their own content creation and identifies their participation in the digital economy as entwined with, but not wholly appropriated by, capitalism. I argue that by emphasizing process over product and connection over commodification, creators can reframe their creative work on social media as working for them (and their audiences), rather than for larger institutions. The creators I spoke with (i.e., Eva, Sofia, Taylor, Brooke, Lucy, Margaret, Elizabeth, Hannah, and Elena)²² often described their content as reaching a relatively small community of other non-Korean individuals who could benefit in some way from hearing about their experiences as a foreign woman in Korea. These creators also frequently noted how they were not aiming to be more popular, nor were they necessarily seeking to make a living from their social media. Although their desires for creativity and self-expression are shared by many other women who produce digital content (e.g., Duffy, 2017), they more clearly discern the freedom they have when they opt out of monetizing their content and abide by their own schedules. The majority of my nine interviewees characterized their content creation as the most fulfilling when it was not tied to a long term goal, but instead when it was viewed as something enjoyable at that point in time. Additionally, their identities inform their content differently than the women bloggers, YouTubers, and Instagram influencers whose online presence has informed numerous studies (Abidin, 2016; Dekavalla, 2020; Garcia-Rapp, 2017; Berryman & Kavka, 2017). My interviewees' content (and that of the

²² See Methodology chapter for demographic information and details on interview methods.

YouTubers I focus on in Chapters Two and Three) is, in large part, dependent upon their being foreigners in another country, so they must constantly grapple with their outsider identities and how their experiences relate to others.

My argument centers creators' definitions of their online participation. This adds to ongoing conversations surrounding digital labor and the fraught relationship between creativity and commerce. That said, I distinguish "work" from "labor." Although the two terms are often conflated in the English language, *labor* insinuates the exploitation and alienation of individuals who generate value for the dominant class (Fuchs, 2020). I point out that much of what creators with very small audiences in niche genres do can be more usefully described as creative *work*. While creative work benefits powerful institutions and increasingly follows a neoliberal, entrepreneurial model (Robbie, 2002), as will be discussed, creative workers also craft knowledge, art, and meaning, and are not wholly duped by those institutions. By working for themselves and for their audiences, content creators²³ can prioritize authenticity, community, pleasure, and future successes over commodification, profit, and celebrity, even while navigating the demands of platforms and pressures from the state. As "outsiders" in South Korea who often face ostracization despite their degrees of assimilation and cultural competency,²⁴ and whose value is often linked to their roles (and related care work) as English teachers, foreign women can benefit from cultivating a transnational, online space that underscores the process over the product.

Some scholars who study online platforms have taken a more aggressive stance on digital labor, arguing that all creativity that occurs on platforms is inherently exploitative (Fuchs, 2013), and warning of the powerful hold technology companies have over user-generated content (van

²³ And specifically "micro-" creators.

²⁴ See Chapter Four for interview data regarding cultural assimilation and foreign identity.

Dijk, 2009). Duffy (2017) provides a more balanced perspective, acknowledging that social media content creation also “provide[s] participants with forms of meaning-making and expression that must not be dismissed.” The women in her study (primarily young beauty and fashion bloggers) find content creation pleasurable, “but they *also* believe that they will benefit professionally from such value-generating activities” (p. 46). This forward-looking entrepreneurial ethos informs Duffy’s (2017) theorization of “aspirational labor,” or “(mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love*” (p. 4). Exploitation is certainly pervasive across platforms owned and controlled by massive global corporations and should be taken seriously. The notion of aspirational labor also provides a useful framework for understanding a lot of what occurs on social media. The (unlikely) possibility of earning millions of dollars as a YouTuber (Rose, 2019), for example, can inspire people to create content that has mainstream appeal, abide by the “rules” of the algorithm, and continue to work for free with the hopes of reaching stardom. However, my findings suggest how content creation on social media still holds positive potentials for creators and their audiences, allowing them to connect across borders, share experiences, and to enjoy the processes of production/consumption.

The sections in this chapter are structured thematically and contextually, as is traditional in cultural studies scholarship,²⁵ and my interview data is woven throughout. I situate excerpts from my interviews with creators within the global context of the platform ecosystem and the local context of the Korean state (and more specifically, the Korean tourism industry and the government’s stance on state-led multiculturalism). Critical perspectives on digital labor and exploitation are crucial to understanding the precarious landscape that creators must traverse if

²⁵ See Methodology chapter for further clarification and rationale.

they want their content to reach an audience. As such, the first sections describe the platform ecosystem and culture of neoliberalism. I supplement this discussion with interview data from creators who describe how their online behaviors and posting strategies are necessarily shaped by platform norms. Social media plays an increasingly central role in promoting tourism and exposing global audiences to other cultures/nations (Pop, Săplăcan, Dabija, & Alt, 2021), so the next sections interrogate contexts of tourism and nation branding practices supported by the Korean government. I once again rely on my interview data to illuminate the precarious existence of foreigners as brand ambassadors for state-sponsored multiculturalism. I present these contexts first, as it adds to the critical conversations that dominate the literature on social media and digital labor, and highlights the constraints of being a public figure (and especially one who is a woman, and whose content implicitly deals with race, nationality, and culture). Finally, I turn toward my interviewees' experiences with the process of content creation, explaining how their creative work is made valuable *for them*, regardless of the value it generates for platforms and/or government organizations/tourist industries. This sets the tone for the chapters that follow, which illustrate how content creation can be a mode of transnational and affective communication that reconstitutes notions of belonging, rather than commodifying culture, the self, or one's experiences.

Navigating the Platform Ecosystem

Content creators are beholden to platforms. Their production may stem from their own creative self-expression, but it could not be seen or shared without corporate giants like Google or Facebook. We are increasingly reliant upon platforms to establish and maintain relationships, purchase goods and services, receive and process information, and in the case of YouTube vlogs, watch and learn from the lives of others. Although platforms provide useful tools for

communication, creativity, and community-building, the power of America's Big Five tech companies (i.e., Google-Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft) has had serious global effects. As José van Dijck, Martijn de Waal, and Thomas Poell (2018) discuss in their extensive work on the platform ecosystem, not only are the operations of platforms largely out of sight of users, but the integrity of public values is at stake as tech corporations control so much of daily life. While public values should ideally reflect those common goods agreed upon by all societal actors, in the platform society, public values are often conflated with economic values (van Dijck et al., 2018). As such, the platform ecosystem subsumes social and emotional life into the marketplace, reshaping our understanding of and relationship to work and to each other.

To reach audiences of other foreigners with whom they can connect, build a community, and/or help navigate Korea/n culture, working within the platform ecosystem means, as Eva touched on in our conversation, adhering to certain "rules." To be successful, even if success simply means creativity and connection, they must balance their own motivations to write blogs or edit videos for fun, skill-building, and social engagement with strategies to ensure their visibility. Appearing approachable, authentic, or (as many of my interviewees articulated) positive, consistently attending to one's public image, and relating to one's audience are all acts of emotional labor that have been commodified in the digital economy (Khamis et al., 2017). While seemingly innocuous, creators suggested they were thinking about and/or adhering to disciplinary modes of being, even when they were not seeking compensation for their content. Curating a positive self-image and being recognized by the audience as a "friend," producing more "high quality" videos and adding strategic keywords to receive more views, or committing to a schedule for posting contributes to the domination of platforms that thrive on these norms.

This supposedly “nonproductive labor” is crucial to the continuation of neoliberal capitalism (Jarrett, 2014), yet it is often dismissed as simply supplementary to material production.

The culture of each individual platform - and where they fit ecologically - always influences participation. “I guess we all kind of... pretend that our lives are better than they really are on Instagram. I think everyone does that. And then on Twitter we all just hate our lives....it depends on the platform,” Hannah remarked. The assumptions about how one is supposed to behave in particular online spaces is not necessarily dictated by the affordances of the platforms themselves, but by the cultures that have formed around them. Elizabeth felt pressure to meet what she felt were her audiences’ Instagram-specific expectations, noting, “so many people just want to see photos of a person [on Instagram]...people are saying that you need to just share photos of yourself. Stop sharing those photos that nobody wants to see. But then I remember that’s not really the reason why I started. I wanted to just share like any random photos.” The discrepancy between Elizabeth’s and her (imagined) audiences’ content expectations, in conjunction with the need to shift one’s behaviors and/or tone as they move between platforms, creates an online environment that is difficult to navigate at best. To successfully maintain an appropriately active online presence, content creators are pressured to cultivate a “platform-specific self-brand,” which is based upon “assumptions about platform materiality and environment, constructions of the audience, and reflections on the creator’s self concept” (Scolere, Pruchniewska, & Duffy, 2018, p. 4).

In addition to cultural and behavioral norms and expectations, the infrastructure of platforms also shapes creators’ participation. One of the most challenging material aspects of platform-specificity is navigating algorithms, the unseen and constant changes which often disrupt creators’ visibility online (Scolere et al., 2018). Speaking to the vagueness of what “the

algorithm” supposedly favors, Elizabeth noted, “I have to create like, a longer post because...the algorithm of Instagram is just longer text posts. So, I’ll have to...try to make it more of a thoughtful, philosophy type of post.” In an environment that is constantly changing both culturally and structurally, reaching an audience (and keeping their attention) requires a consistent devotion of time, energy, and effort.

Algorithms have also been notoriously discriminatory, despite their supposedly benign design. The people who write the code and make decisions for automated search functions, Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) writes, “hold all types of values, many of which openly promote racism, sexism, and false notions of meritocracy” (pp. 1-2). In her book, *Algorithms of Oppression*, Noble (2018) illustrates numerous ways in which the technologies we use every day (and often have no choice but to use) perpetuate harmful discriminatory ideals. Adding to the discussion of the power of algorithms, Sophie Bishop (2020) draws on her extensive ethnography of YouTube industries to identify the strategies of “algorithmic experts” who purport to teach creators how to ensure success on the platform. Despite the well-documented and persistent barriers of entry for marginalized groups, the ubiquity of algorithmic experts “speaks to how neoliberal logics of individual responsibility encourage rational subjects to engage with experts and a meritocratic logic sustains that anyone can make it if they engage the right expertise, and work hard enough” (Bishop, 2018, p. 9).

Myths of meritocracy and appeals to the freedom of expression obscure the power imbalance between platforms and their users. Unpacking its “semantic territories,” Tarleton Gillespie (2010) argues that the word “platform” implies impartiality by evoking notions of being raised, level, and accessible. “YouTube and its competitors claim to empower the individual to speak - lifting us all up evenly,” Gillespie (2010) writes, “YouTube is designed as

an open-armed egalitarian facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative technical restrictions” (p. 352). Platform intermediaries often obscure the ways in which they are like traditional media and ultimately continue to serve their own financial interests under the guise of empowerment for users (Gillespie, 2010). This focus on the individual promotes a do-it-yourself ethos that removes the burden of liability from platforms, while still barring users from being legitimate stakeholders in the platform ecosystem. While Cunningham and Craig (2019) have offered various ways that creators have attempted to govern themselves, pushing back against this system through collective organizing and self-management, the power asymmetry remains.

User-generated content invigorates platforms like YouTube and Instagram, but users have little say in how these platforms are actually governed, let alone the extent to which their creations fuel the interest of large corporations. When creators are not vying for objective popularity, advertisements running in their videos, or corporate sponsorships - as was the case for most of the women I spoke with - they may feel as though they then have total control over what they produce. But platforms are in the business of commodifying users’ data, resulting in “massive capital accumulation for the owners of these platforms, as well as their countries” (Jin, 2015). Even when creative online participation is not considered “work” in the traditional sense, and/or when it is not actively monetized by producers themselves, platforms generate value by seizing users’ information (Casilli & Posada, 2019). While creators can choose to abstain from making videos or posting photos, or to ignore entirely the preferences of audiences and algorithms, making either of these choices means that they will not be able to connect with and help others like them. The next section continues to use interview data to shape my discussion of neoliberalism as a guiding logic on social media.

Social Media and The Cult(ure) of Neoliberalism

By sharing ad revenue with creators, platforms like YouTube construct themselves as equal “partners” while employing numerous mechanisms of governance (e.g., demonetization, content moderation, removal of videos with copyright infringement, etc.) out of creators’ control (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). This structure for creative production in turn promotes a culture of neoliberalism in which citizens are valued as consumers and entrepreneurial individualism is normalized (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Neoliberalism encourages and empowers individuals to work in their own self-interest, a sentiment that emerged in my interviews with creators. Despite the general absence of plans to monetize content and the resistance to describing their production as “work,” creators described how their engagement with social media could be beneficial to building their resumes, positioning them for their careers. “Even if I can’t directly get paid for my articles,” Eva said of her writing on her personal blog (as opposed to writing as a commissioned freelancer), “it’s a great portfolio and resume.” This willingness to work for free and for fun, while precarious and potentially exploitable, can be a way for creators to harness their own agency (as I will discuss later in this chapter), but it also alludes to the competitive nature of the digital economy. To “get ahead,” whether on their specific platforms of choice or in potential fields of employment, creators must constantly practice self-improvement, and excel in a market in which everyone is supposedly equal.²⁶

Speaking to how platformization has restructured creative industries, Ji-Hyeon Kim and Jun Yu (2019) argue that the move to a “competition-based model” of production has led to the

²⁶ Of course, the notion of an “equal” Internet, while still at times invoked in techno-utopian discourse, has been dismantled by feminist media scholars who discuss in depth inequities of participation based on race, gender, sexuality, etc. (see, for example: Nakamura (2013) and Noble (2018)).

creation of a new set of norms. In their case study of the Korean Webtoon industry, Kim and Yu (2019) observe,

with precarious forms of employment that fall under the banner of creativity, there often lies high risk borne by the workers themselves, which eventually leads to the intensification of neoliberal governance...Webtoons are no exception, and the “self-study” several interviewees referred to was seen as a form of free, extra labor, in an extremely competitive environment. (p. 5)

Duffy (2017) also points to the “self-study” narrative that arose in her interviews with bloggers, most of whom taught themselves skills like editing and video production. Not only do creators have to work on how they present themselves online, they must also hone their technical skills and marketing strategies, always keeping abreast of the latest trends and technologies. In my interview with Eva, she mentioned that she felt that the constant adaptation required of more full-time influencers was a “global sentiment” and a requirement for “visibility on social media.” “I haven’t done it, ‘cause it sounds exhausting just thinking about it,” Eva remarked, alluding to the notion that keeping up with the “Instagram strategy” added an extra layer of immaterial labor that, at least for her, was not worth it.

The competitive environment of social media production promotes the notion that anyone who wants it badly enough and who practices sufficient self-discipline will be able to succeed. As Duffy (2017) points out, this “importance of one’s self-will dovetails quite well with neoliberal ideologies emphasizing reliance on the self, above else” (p. 63). While this is not inherently toxic per se, the culture of competition in these online spaces extends to creators who imagine themselves as opting out of the link between content and capital. Even when producers do not profit from their work, “the logic of competition itself, once thought to be exclusively relevant to professionals and experts, has extended into the domain of unpaid amateur labor” and thus creation “cannot be separated from the dynamics of capital” (Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 7).

In this culture of self-interest and self-reliance, individuals who post publicly must be acutely aware of their image, ensuring that they are taking into consideration who might be part of their eclectic audience. Thinking about how their content might help or harm them, some creators anticipated the surveillance of their social media by a potential employer. Projecting into the future, Elizabeth said she saw her content “just as a public thing and also to keep building my resume in case some day I want to go back into that field [journalism] that I don’t have a huge gap of work, work, work, and then just a gray area of teaching.”²⁷ Lucy reflected this forward thinking as well:

I won’t do anything that will incredibly prohibit me from getting employment in the future because YouTube is not my long term goal. It’s just a hobby for me, so I can’t put anything out that is super controversial or like, very, very raw and affect my future job opportunities.

Hannah explicitly reiterated this stance saying, “I try to make sure that mostly what I’m putting out online is positive. That way it won’t impact, you know, the way a future employer might see me.” When creators insisted that they were careful to monitor what pieces of their lives they shared online, they never spoke of privacy in relation to the platforms themselves. Instead, they turned inward, reflecting on their desires to stay true to themselves while also setting themselves up for future success. It is not as though they are hiding anything from their audiences per se, but just that they are being selective about the pieces of their lives they choose to share.

Lucy viewed her tendency to avoid raw emotions or controversial topics as a strategy to ensure that she remained “marketable,” a choice of words that frames her online self-presentation

²⁷ “Work” and “teaching” here are discursively constructed in opposition to one another. That “teaching” - and specifically teaching in Korea, where native English speakers only need any undergraduate degree to teach children English - is also not always legitimate work is something to be considered carefully. Even though Elizabeth was likely trying to demonstrate the coherent narrative she hoped her resume would have, categorizing teaching as a “gray area” alludes to the idea that this type of work *generally* is un/dervalued (and also feminized) and that her unpaid labor had more potential to help her succeed. I cannot help but see the similarities between teachers and social media influencers who face the multiple demands of un/dercompensated and emotion/care work, as well as being viewed as resources to generate value for others.

in neoliberal terms. In doing so, she is able to claim a stronger sense of agency in relation to her content and greater control over her own privacy, while overlooking the structural power of platforms. Neoliberal logic creates a tension for creators. They are rewarded for their individualism and self-optimization, and for cultivating a legible and relatable self-brand which they can then relay to employers. Yet they are also tasked to constantly and consistently please “consumers,” an amorphous group composed of fans and followers, friends and family, potential employers or future corporate sponsors, and in the case of creators who make travel-related content, the national government and its affiliate organizations. Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) refer to this flattening of audiences on social media as “context collapse,” a phenomenon which requires that individuals consider multiple (and normally disparate) audiences simultaneously. For Twitter users, Marwick and boyd (2011) argue, navigating these overlapping audiences means relying on self-censorship and balance; “People refrain altogether from discussing certain topics on Twitter, while others balance strategically targeted tweets with personal information” (p. 124). In my interviews, I found that creators both censored themselves and balanced expectations of authenticity. Their social media is personal and self-expressive, a space in which to genuinely connect with others, but it is also embedded in the precarious commercialized space of the global digital economy.

Contemporary brand culture blurs the authentic and commodified self (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Nowhere is this more apparent than on popular social media platforms where ordinary individuals must constantly balance presenting their “true” selves with a carefully curated public-facing image. In our conversation, Lucy commented on this dilemma, committing herself to her own authenticity which she defined as “being willing to sacrifice views, community, followers, all of that for being yourself.” However, the blurring between authenticity and commodification

means that even creators who intentionally avoid celebrity, who resist partnering with the “wrong” brands, and who do not seek to exchange self-expression for profit are still working within the constraints of neoliberal brand culture. The contemporary shift from the production of *content* to the production of *culture* is rooted in our emotional relationships to material products (Banet-Weiser, 2012), and we should consider what is at stake when these products are not simply a skin cleanser or a handbag, but are people, countries, and/or cultures. In the next sections, I extend my discussion of contemporary brand culture to address the ways in which the logics that inform the branding of the self also inform the branding of the nation. I demonstrate how the Korean state can leverage public lifestyle content created by foreigners to help build an inclusive and multicultural brand. As with their relationship to platforms, foreign creators are also dependent upon a nation that constrains their behaviors (e.g., what work they have access to, how they can maintain a visa, what cultural norms they must follow, etc.) while partnering with them as ambassadors for tourism, travel, and cultural exchange.

Representing Korea: Creators’ Concerns and the Commodification of Multiculturalism

Working within the neoliberal culture of social media influencing means that public figures - regardless of audience size - must build a personal brand. As our conversation turned toward the ways in which other creators’ brands highlight particular aspects of their personal lives (for example, interracial relationships), Lucy expressed concern over whether she (and others like her) were “profiting [from] or using Korea for content.” She linked this concern to her own desire to be perceived as “authentic,” a quality that has long been a core commercial value (Duffy, 2017). Of foreign creators’ relationships to Korea, Lucy went on,

Are some people here using Korea? I don’t know. I don’t really like clickbait and I don’t like using Korea or using Korean people for content. But I don’t know how it’s avoidable when you live here. I did a video recently that spiked in views. And I know why. And it’s ‘cause it was the only video I’ve got on my channel with my coworkers.

Lucy differentiates her own content from that which more obviously relies on “clickbait” (such as the ubiquitous “THINGS I HATE ABOUT KOREA” videos), but still alludes to conflicting feelings about *featuring* Korea as *branding* Korea. “In some ways,” she reflected, “anything...on my channel that’s branded ‘Korea’ is using Korea. So I just have to be aware of that and be ethical with it.” Talking through these dilemmas, we came to the consensus that it was difficult, if not impossible, to mitigate misunderstandings about creators’ intentions (for example, when Taylor mentioned receiving criticism about her “being too mean”). But “as long as they’re not fetishizing and they’re informing and it benefits people and it enlightens people, then I agree with it,” Lucy concluded.

It is not my goal to judge the extent to which anyone is “using” Korea; as David Oh & Chuyun Oh (2017) have aptly argued, there is little doubt that some (especially White, English-speaking) creators essentialize differences, rejecting hybridity and using Korea/n culture for their own consumptive benefit. However, my discussion with Lucy about authenticity and branding ignited more questions about the complexity of foreigners’ relationship with Korea, beyond unidirectional narratives of appropriation, exoticization, or clickbait. Speaking with creators who voiced legitimate concerns about being misunderstood, who were not specifically seeking fame or fortune, and who were more reliant on depicting their ordinary, everyday lives than some exotic adventures in a foreign country, led me to consider how their desires to be authentic often meant working within commercial spaces that appeared to be the best fit for them/their audiences. The notion of finding the correct “fit” is crucial for creators who are trying to build a legible and relatable self-brand (Duffy, 2017). Sofia spoke to this directly, saying that “when I get sponsorships, I usually never take them unless I think it will benefit my audience in some

way.” She mentioned that she partnered with both East Meet East²⁸ and a plastic surgery company, not because *she* was using the dating app or had gotten plastic surgery, but because her audience “would probably really benefit about knowing this.” Creators’ choices to work with particular organizations and not others reflects their operation within an “ethics of authenticity” in which they stay true to themselves and to their audiences (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020).

But it is not only individuals whose brands must be legibly authentic; governments also strive to project a particular national image on the global stage. Just as corporations have understood the value of partnering with individual content creators who have established a loyal following, national organizations and governments can also leverage creators’ content for the benefit of the national brand. Creators may feel empowered by their ability to determine for themselves which partnerships they will pursue. But as social media researchers Mariah Wellman and colleagues (2020) point out, “novice influencers” are less able to be selective with these relationships. For these individuals, “financial and ethical imperatives are often in conflict” (Wellman et al., 2020, p. 76), which my participants confirmed by articulating concerns over compromising their creativity for compensation. For “amateur” creators, conflicting financial and ethical imperatives can mean that these individuals are more likely to make content for free, inherently benefiting intermediaries who have no financial incentive to discourage over-production (Duffy, 2017; Stoldt, Wellman, Ekdale, & Tully, 2019). When foreigners are approached by inter/national organizations related to travel, tourism, and culture, they may feel a sense of pride in being recognized as “brand” ambassadors of sorts, enjoying the task of

²⁸ From their website, the site is described as “exclusively dedicated to Asian dating” and “a successful platform for creating happy, passionate, and fulfilling relationships.” Sofia is not Asian, but has built her brand around Korea and Japan, so promoting this particular platform could open her to further scrutiny, particularly because of a previous experience with her viral dating-related post and accusations of fetishization.

promoting a country they genuinely enjoy. However, they are also tasked with further pressure to convey a positive image of both themselves and Korea. With direct connections to global audiences, foreign creators are not necessarily valued for their creativity, but for their already-established audiences as potential consumers, and are thus constrained in what they are “allowed” to create.

Regarding her shift toward creating content “mostly for fun now,” Taylor mentioned her previous partnership with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). “I got sent to Jeju...to film and that was like, a work trip....it was fun, but it wasn’t *for* fun. Like, we had a packed schedule, we had certain requirements to meet,” she said. While UNESCO is an agency that promotes international peace and cooperation, rather than commercially-driven tourism, this type of travel partnership speaks to “structured flexibility,” a strategy employed to balance the goals of a particular campaign with creators’ commitments to authenticity (Stoldt et al., 2019). Because Taylor equates “fun” with creative freedom and/or self-expression, defining her trip to Jeju Island as “fun” but not “*for* fun” captures her working within the framework of structured flexibility; she can share her own experiences and perspectives, but only within the constraints set by the organization. Taylor went on to say that she had a similar and “more serious” partnership with the Ministry of Unification of Korea. While she did not discuss the specific work she did for this partnership, the Ministry of Unification is a department of the Korean government that, like UNESCO, seeks peace and prosperity for the Korean peninsula. By partnering with foreign content creators and creating constraints under which they must operate, government organizations can put forth an image of the nation that is diverse, inclusive, and that serves as proof of Korea’s commitment to state-led multiculturalism.

“State-led multiculturalism is driven by a sense of ‘having to be’ rather than ‘wanting to be’ multicultural” (Watson, 2010, pp. 338), in part due to its connection to Korea’s place in the global economy. Constantly competing with other countries for labor and investment (Watson, 2010), Korea must appear as an attractive place for foreigners while protecting its culture and preserving its ethnic and racialized nationalism.²⁹ But faced with the realities of an increasing non-Korean population, policies that promote “multiculturalism,” education scholar Jessica Walton (2020) argues, are actually a “form of Korean-centered nation-building that prioritizes a ‘core’ Korean identity” (p. 841) while presenting the nation as welcoming to foreign residents. Speaking to depictions of foreigners’ identities on Japanese television, Iwabuchi (2005) problematizes the commodification of multiculturalism:

Multiculturalism is criticized for its underlying conception of culture as a coherent entity, which goes together with the conception of a multicultural society as a mosaic that is constituted of clearly demarcated boundaries between ethnic cultures, with the dominant group unmarked. (p. 110)

This approach to multiculturalism allows the nation to commodify “ordinary” foreigners and functionally “eliminates ambiguity and multiplicity in the form of national belonging” (Iwabuchi, 2005). As such, this type of state-led multiculturalist discourse often ignores transnationalism, invoking traditional models of the nation-as-container in which one must demonstrate their primary allegiance to a singular nation (Vertovec, 2001).

Discursively, the term “foreigner” is all-encompassing; everyone visibly non-Korean is grouped into the same category. This is problematic, as the way migrants (or travelers) are

²⁹ By this I am referring to Choe’s (2006) discussion of “ethnic nationalism,” a concept evoked by Korean elites during the late Joseon dynasty that conflated race, ethnicity, and nationality. “The ethnic centered nation,” Choe (2006) writes, “became a mythical ideal that filled the gap left by the absence of the Korean state under Japanese colonialism. There was no other means to maintain and strengthen a Korean national identity than to assert its racial uniqueness and the significance of its culture” (pp. 94-95). For further context on the ways in which Korea’s multiculturalist discourse pervades media and society and the daily lives of foreigners, see Chapter Three.

treated is, in reality, dependent upon their racial, national, and/or ethnic identity. The first influx of foreign migrant workers to Korea in the 1990s “were subject to intense exploitation, discrimination, and abuse; they were treated as little more than cheap, expendable commodities” and the government played a key role in their criminalization (Lim, 2010, p. 55).³⁰ Overt discrimination toward foreign residents in Korea continues to dissipate, especially as instances of prejudice can be easily amplified on social media, thus damaging Korea’s global image. However, racism, colorism, and neo-nationalism are still pervasive. Regardless of one’s actual background or origin, residents in Korea who have darker skin are often perceived and treated as poorer and less desirable (Kim, 2020). Additionally, biases against other nations within Asia persist. Specifically, one recent study interrogated the rise of “neo-nationalism” in Korea, linking anti-Chinese sentiments (including offensive and antiquated stereotypes such as being “dirty, noisy, slow, and...wily”) to Chinese international students facing verbal aggressions, feeling unwelcome, and being unable to secure housing (Lee, Jon, & Byun, 2017). With all of this in mind, it is easy to see why Korean government organizations and tourist industries would aim to counteract these biases and prejudicial rhetoric by constantly curating a public image of inclusivity. In the two next sections, I consider the intersection of social media and the tourism industry to address the ways in which multiculturalism can be cultivated as a national brand by emphasizing positive non-Korean perspectives.

The Tourism Industry and the Invention of an Image Online

To construct a brand that is visibly diverse,³¹ the Korean tourism industry can rely on images of Korea/n culture posted and narrativized by non-Korean residents and travelers on

³⁰ Which, of course, resonates with policies enacted by many countries (like the U.S.) that also maintain a long-standing trajectory of xenophobia and discrimination toward “outsiders.”

³¹ Or, a “happy Seoul for foreigners,” as literature scholar Jin Suh Jim (2015) writes.

social media. This allows the state to bolster its multicultural image while not requiring a formal acceptance and/or integration of foreigners (who unavoidably maintain multiple national/cultural identities due to their being non-Korean) into society. Taylor expressed her thoughts about the link between the Korean government's relationship to foreigners and its reliance on the tourism industry, saying,

You know, the government went through big tourism phases, but then, now that I think the Korean Wave is starting to die out a little, the government's like, at a loss. And plus, you know, there's a whole lot of socio-economic troubles in Korea right now. Like, you know, Korea has so many problems they need to fix...high suicide rates among the elderly, high poverty rates, you know, some of the worst gender discrimination of OECD countries. It's just like, Korea has so many problems that I think foreigners are very low priority for them.³²

Not only did she feel as though foreigners were a “very low” priority, but also noted the government's selectivity when it comes to non-Korean residents. “The government - especially these days,” she said, “has been very picky and choosy. You know, we want these types of foreigners, not those types of foreigners...I think the government just has no direction or goals with foreigners at all.” Beyond the need to address more immediate national issues that Taylor mentions, part of the government's lack of “direction” when it comes to immigration likely stems from the inability to treat all “foreigners” in the same way, despite them being discursively categorized as a cohesive group. Generally speaking, the foreigners the government “wants” are those with higher levels of education, who are willing to assimilate, and who are active contributors in bolstering the national economy. This is not unlike countries like Canada, which shares Korea's points-based system in which migrants are judged based on merit; In this system,

³² According to data collected by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), South Korea does indeed have one of the highest suicide rates among OECD countries, and elderly individuals (over 65) make up roughly 28% of the total suicide victims. Reporting on this statistic in the Korea Exposé in 2014, religious studies scholar Se-Woong Koo highlights the link between suicide rates and the staggering population of elderly individuals who are low income. According to OECD data collected in 2017, Korea also has a notable gender pay gap, with women earning only 63% of that of men.

“Immigration is no longer a matter of origin, but of human capital” (Farcy, 2020, p. 730).

Nevertheless, for Korea, this can also lead to a preference for individuals with whiter skin who are from Western countries, as the nation operates along socially-constructed hierarchies based on race and origin (Lee, 2017). Korea is known for an intoxicating entertainment industry, delicious food and wild nightlife, and as a robust competitor in the global economy, yet by prioritizing some non-Korean migrants over others, Korea³³ has set itself up as a country that is not entirely foreigner-friendly.

As Taylor alludes to in the quote above, the Korean Wave helped Korea strengthen its international image as an entertainment powerhouse. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the popularity of television dramas skyrocketed across Asia (Jung, 2009), and the K-pop industry was beginning to intentionally target overseas audiences. By 2008, the New Korean Wave - or *Hallyu 2.0* - began. This new era was defined by a shift in consumer identity (namely, from middle-aged East Asian drama fans to teen and 20-something K-pop fans all over the world) and by the central role of social media (Jin, 2016). Fans all over the world were now able to access, circulate, and discuss Korean media, and people who had never been exposed to Korea/n culture before were now learning to write *hangul* and pirating the latest K-pop music videos. In 2012, PSY’s “Gangnam Style” suddenly became one of the most watched videos in YouTube history (at the time). Joseph Nye and Youna Kim (2013) point to this moment (and others like it)³⁴ as a way in which Korea was able to “re-invent” itself by “creating a more favorable and lasting brand by the government’s cultural policy that global circulations of media cultural products

³³ While my focus is on Korea in this dissertation, we should not forget that *most* industrialized “First World” countries - particularly those which rely on a capitalist system in which class and race often converge for those deemed “less desirable” - prefer certain migrants over others, even if it is not technically ingrained in the law.

³⁴ We might say that BTS winning the Billboard Music Award for Top Social Artist in 2017 was another such moment.

promote the construction of soft power, an attractive image of the nation as a whole.” However, Nye and Kim (2013) argue that soft power that is primarily bolstered by “happy, fun, trouble-free, cosmopolitan consumption...do[es] not always lead to any in-depth understanding of the history, culture and society within which the popular cultural forms are embedded and produced” (p. 39). If the Korean Wave is indeed “starting to die out,” then a turn toward leveraging the influential potential of user-generated content can be an attractive alternative nation branding tactic.

The proliferation of foreigners in Korea already documenting their lives on social media has allowed campaigns created and/or promoted by the Korean Tourism Organization (KTO) to move away from partnering with commodified K-pop idols to partnering with “ordinary” individuals who happen to create content. One of the ways that the KTO has leaned into this strategy is their promotion of the Instagram hashtag #koreabyme (see: Figure 5). The first use³⁵ of this hashtag by KTO’s official Instagram page, @travelgram_korea, was in October 2017 in a caption accompanying a picture of a fall landscape. This Instagram account primarily features pictures of a wide variety of locations throughout Korea, and is interspersed with photographs of people enjoying these locations (often captured without their faces showing, which helps the viewer envision themselves as the individual depicted). #koreabyme implies that the associated posts, whether reposted by a tourism organization or not, are not some artificial or manufactured version of Korea, but are representations of the country via the real experiences of ordinary people.³⁶ By curating this type of content, KTO can take a step back from generating their own marketing tactics and instead, rely on the (mostly) free labor of Instagram users.

³⁵ It is possible that the hashtag was used sooner - either by KTO or another IG user - but the first public post that currently exists on @travelgram_korea is the one described from October 2017.

³⁶ Notably, “KoreabyMe” is also a copyrighted brand owned by Yescalldotcom, Inc. The website, koreabyme.com, launched in early 2020 and explicitly partners with non-Koreans in Korea and centers content created by foreigners,



Figure 5: #koreabyme promotional Instagram post from @travelgram_korea encouraging users to use the hashtag (April 29, 2018)

KTO has also directly sponsored and/or partnered with foreign content creators, sending them on trips around the country about which they are expected to post. For example, in July 2019, Cari (@caricakez), one of the creators whose videos I analyze in the next chapter, wrote a blog post and filmed a vlog about her trip to Hwaseong Fortress, and was asked to “take over” @travelgram_korea’s Instagram Stories to post about her trip. Following trends of influencer marketing across the globe, KTO has collaborated with a number of YouTube and Instagram creators, inviting them to experience the country, culture, and cuisine and promote these experiences to their followers (Kang, 2019). As with other destination marketing organizations

for foreigners; its YouTube channel description reads: “South Korean Tourism Information from a Foreigner’s Perspective.” Its official Instagram, @koreabyme.official, primarily reposts the work of other foreigners who have used the hashtag (and who often comment their appreciation on the reposted content).

(DMOs), KTO cannot offer their (potential) consumers a product or service directly, but are instead in the business of helping them visualize a destination and the experiences they will have there (Stoldt et al., 2019). While influencer marketing is now commonplace for many industries, partnering with individuals in the business of crafting visual narratives that are also highly affective and relationship-driven is especially fruitful for the tourism industry. Unlike improving upon and marketing a new product, DMOs are constrained by the characteristics the travel destination already possesses and the reviews it receives by word-of-mouth (Stoldt et al., 2019). Therefore, influencers provide a much-sought-after asset: a loyal and trusting community of followers/consumers. By adopting influencer marketing tactics and allowing some flexibility in what/how creators produce, tourism organizations can thrive and generate value for the country.

Constructing Korea's Global Multicultural Brand

Increased tourism boosts the Korean economy, and the messages and images about Korea/n culture put forth by foreign content creators helps construct a national brand. Political economist Juliette Schwak (2020) traces South Korea's historical lineage of nation branding discourse, which has been built upon national anxieties. Japanese colonialism and the pervasive presence of the U.S. destabilized Korea's national identity, and the 1997 financial crisis marked yet another period of national "disgrace" (Schwak, 2020). In the 1990s, Korea faced increased pressure from the World Trade Organization (WTO) to eliminate trade barriers. Foreign investments in the Korean economy skyrocketed, showing promise for the country. However, after rumors of instability and uncertainty circulated, investors massively withdrew from Asian economies in 1997. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) did not respond immediately and a financial crisis ensued (Piller & Cho, 2013). "What the IMF-imposed measures meant for South Korea," linguistics scholars Ingrid Piller and Jinhyun Cho (2013) write, "was the break up and

privatization of the *chabeols*,³⁷ their sell-off to foreign investors, mass layoffs, the cowing of South Korea's militant trade unions, the privatization of public services, and the minimization of public spending" (p. 27). This context informs these particular scholars' discussion of neoliberalism as language policy and English as the medium of success, but also highlights the compounding factors that catalyzed national brand policies.

The first campaign explicitly tailored to nation branding was "Dynamic Korea," a slogan reviewed and selected by the Kim Dae Jung administration before the 2002 FIFA World Cup. "For a nation invested in cultivating its image on the international stage and concerned about matching its profile against its cohost and former colonizer," Katherine In-Young Lee (2015) writes of the Japan-Korea soccer faceoff, "the words 'Dynamic Korea' struck a confident and assertive tone" (p. 113). Although the slogan was abandoned several years later, it launched the continued pursuit of neoliberal branding tactics to ensure the curation of a positive international public image (Lee, 2015). In 2009, (former) President Lee Myung-bak formed the Presidential Council on National Branding (PCNB) which hired foreign promotional consultants to re-brand Korea and increase the country's competitiveness (Schwak, 2020). Schwak (2020) refers to this shift in national policy as "competitive common sense" or the "assertion that global economic competition is the movement that drives actors' behaviours and constrains their agency" (p. 6). Lee's foreign consultants pushed the need for Korea to transform and "adapt to neoliberal capitalist culture," turning its post-financial crisis "inadequacies" into fuel to harness political and economic competitiveness in the global market (Schwak, 2020, pp. 15-16).

³⁷ A *chaebol* (재벌) is a large conglomerate controlled by an all-powerful owner, which generally stays within the family. The *chaebol* will have great social, economic, and cultural capital with ties to government agencies and notable sway over political policies.

In the context of neoliberal South Korea,³⁸ the commodification of “ordinary” individuals’ content has become a new mode of nation branding. Nation branding explicitly links nationalism and marketing and is especially apparent in (though not exclusive to) the realm of tourism (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011). By constructing a positive brand, Korea can repair the damage done to its global reputation, as well as attract potential consumers (i.e., prospective tourists, as well as people more interested and invested in learning Korean, buying Korean products, consuming Korean media, etc.). For Zala Volcic and Mark Andrejevic (2011), nation branding is also a technique of neoliberal governance insofar as branding campaigns enlist members of the population to participate in “co-creating” the brand “in the name of both national allegiance and economic self-interest” (p. 602). When DMOs partner with foreign content creators, offering them compensation and/or services/products in exchange for the positive promotion of tourist destinations, they are enacting a form of neoliberal governance. Creators can feel as though they are able to maintain creative freedom - which, at times, they are - while becoming global ambassadors of travel (and in the case of my interviewees, solo female travel). But at the same time, organizations are able to co-opt others’ affective visions of Korea/n culture and leverage the loyal audiences that creators have cultivated themselves. Even though corporate partnerships may work to legitimize individuals’ self-brands (albeit, if followers see certain partnerships as inauthentic, their brands can just as easily be harmed), they also take advantage of the emotional ties creators have to their content and their audiences while ostensibly empowering creators.

Official partnerships with intermediary organizations enable creators to feel as though they are being supported by the government (not to mention receiving all-expenses-paid trips

³⁸ The anecdotal reputation of which is often related to Koreans’ industriousness and the normalization of intense and competitive work culture.

and/or compensation for posts they might already want to make) while the state co-opts their labor to bolster its national brand. As more “authentic” representatives than manufactured celebrities, YouTubers and bloggers can be perceived as embodying the global, heterogeneous futures of the still relatively homogenous state. For example, Iman (@hijabi_in_seoul_city), another creator whose videos inform my research, has worked with KTO numerous times, promoting travel in general and at times partnering with Muslim-friendly restaurants and accommodations, sharing a side of Korea that others may be unaware exists. The image she has created for herself online is characterized by positivity. She appears approachable and happy, directly engages with her audience, and shows her friends (often other YouTubers) in her videos, indicating her sociability. Her active presence as an ambassador for traveling to Korea, whether in sponsored posts/videos or not, helps to promote a new image of diversity and inclusion for a nation that has continued to degrade Blackness.³⁹ Sam Okyere, a Ghanaian television personality and local “foreign” celebrity, has been extremely vocal about his experiences of discrimination in South Korea, where he gained permanent residency in 2019, and recently received major backlash for speaking out against racism. After sharing on his Instagram his disappointment with Korean high schoolers in blackface (an all too common occurrence even in 2020), he received so many attacks online that he resigned from his position on a television quiz show and publicly apologized for his “causing trouble” (Park, 2020).

This is just one minor example of the ways in which a public figure’s posting on social media platforms matters to Korea as a nation. Although Iman is by no means as famous as Okyere, her mostly positive image and alliance with tourism positions her as a more preferable foreigner in the eyes of the state. Her ordinariness can also be read as presenting a more “real”

³⁹ For further discussion on the ways in which Blackness has been constructed and (de)valued in the Korean context, see Chapter Three.

version of the lifestyle of a foreigner of African descent,⁴⁰ insinuating that Okyere's perspectives are perhaps unique and that ordinary foreigners are actually more agreeable. This message works well to preserve Korea's international image and, as Walton (2020) has argued, ultimately promotes "multiculturalism without diversity" as foreigners are encouraged to assimilate to the fullest extent possible, which means not questioning the status quo. While avoiding being overly emotional or producing uncontroversial content helps constitute a beneficial personal brand, it also leads to the cultivation of an idealized "foreigner" identity that works in favor of the state. It is not that all foreigners - particularly those who have darker skin and who are from non-Western countries - experience equal acceptance in Korean society, but their stories are not the ones that are circulated on social media; commercial sponsorships amplify the voices that are the most marketable. Although creators (often) receive compensation for their efforts, their labor (especially their emotional labor) is commodified to bolster the Korean economy, and their images become useful for the promotion of diversity.

Foreigners in Korea who create public content on social media - whether monetized or not - serve as both ambassadors of their home countries and as (supposed) representatives of Korea's foreigner community. In the interest of cultivating an attractive multicultural image, it is important that those creators who are constructed as nation-brand ambassadors are ordinary, approachable, positive, and most importantly, demonstrate their assimilation to and admiration of Korean culture, cuisine, and customs. It is significant that the majority of my interviewees are White women, who are already granted privilege by racialized hierarchies in Korea; their careful management of their emotions and emphasis on entrepreneurial self-development serves to further that privilege. I am by no means suggesting that producing negative content that attacks

⁴⁰ Iman is very explicit about her Somali heritage, although she is actually from Minnesota. Likely, her unaccented English and her American citizenship status provides her with a certain level of privilege not experienced by others.

Korea/n culture would be a preferable alternative. However, we should take seriously the often contradictory issues these women face as outsiders who are simultaneously privileged *and* marginalized, whose content creation is a form of work *and* leisure, and whose identities are both commodifiable *and* authentic.

The next section brings to the fore creators' relationship to their social media presence and processes. Thus far, this chapter has demonstrated the various institutional contexts within which these women produce creative work. My review of the literature, supported by creators' experiences, unpacks the ways in which neoliberal brand culture and capitalist imperatives of competition and profit simultaneously shape the norms of social media and Korea's image on the global stage. This context is necessary for understanding the asymmetrical relationship that foreigners have with larger institutions (i.e., the state, corporate industries, and platform intermediaries). With this knowledge, it is interesting that the women I spoke with would still continue to pursue putting their real lives online, opening themselves up to critique and having to decide the extent to which they will conform to pressures to commodify themselves and their experiences. However, what emerged through our conversations was an emphasis on process over product. In the next section, I consider the ways in which content creators distance themselves from the promises of money or fame, framing their creative work as pleasurable, beneficial, and valuable for them and their audiences.

“When you love what you do, you’re never really working”: The Pleasures, Benefits, and Values of Content Creation

Each of the nine content creators with whom I spoke in 2019 insisted on their desires to make public online content about their lives in Korea and were not driven by money or fame, or even aspirations of one day being able to work on their social media full-time. “I would not be

doing it...if I were just focused on the money because it can get very discouraging,” Elena told me, “I’ve been doing this for how many years? And like, compared to those people who are actually making a living out of it, I’m nowhere near there.” This sentiment was not framed as a complaint, but rather, a reminder that she was in it for the right reasons (that is, creating when, what, and how she wants to, rather than trying to appease others). “I used to be very pressured to like, put stuff up regularly...but now I’m like, well...if I don’t post a video one week, nothing’s going to happen,” she continued. By adhering to her own schedule and “making it a bit more casual,” rather than whatever was being imposed on her by external factors, Elena felt she was able to make her creation work in ways that benefited her and her audience.

Other creators also explicitly distanced themselves from more popular creators who may not only feel pressure to appeal to the largest audience possible, but who have achieved a certain level of celebrity they viewed as undesirable. “I don’t know what I’ll do if I reach that point,” Lucy said, regarding the potential for her YouTube channel to reach hundreds of thousands of subscribers, “I kind of don’t want to be a celebrity...or some unattainable person, because I’m literally like you.” While her statement alludes to the performative aspects of authenticity and ordinariness that other scholars have discussed (e.g., Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Jerslev, 2016; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017) Lucy - with less than two thousand Instagram followers - *is* ordinary. Although her collective audience is not especially large, she continues to create lifestyle content that translates her lived reality in Korea to aesthetic snapshots of the everyday online. And in part because she is truly a *micro*-influencer, who made clear in our conversation that she did *not* hope to become a social media star, Lucy (and others like her) is able to engage directly with individuals all over the world, exchange ideas, and maintain a dialogue, regardless of the extent to which her content is commodifiable.

Although public social media content generates value for state and corporate actors (as described through this chapter), this does not negate the ways in which content creation is valuable for the creators themselves. Making online content - whether videos, photographs, blog posts - occurs within the structures of capitalism, but does not require creators to approach their production as a product to be bought and sold. Rather, creation can be a way to form and maintain transnational connections, to communicate with others all over the world, and to transmit feelings - not of excitement or exoticism, but of ordinariness. In this section, I focus on how creators themselves define their relationships to social media and digital production/consumption, problematizing commonplace distinctions made between work and play, labor and leisure to show how creators are able to maintain agency, even as their content contributes to nation branding. “Free labor,” writes Tiziana Terranova (2000) of participation in digital spaces, “is not necessarily exploited labor.” As I have discussed, content creators’ emotional and material labor *does* generate value for platforms, and it can be commodified by institutional actors for purposes that extend beyond creators themselves. But at the same time, to deny women’s relationship to their own social media presence is to conflate their focus on personal fulfillment with misunderstanding the potentials of exploitation online. Most of my interviewees acknowledged the cons of putting their lives online; namely, they mentioned issues surrounding privacy and the protection of personal information, opening oneself up to criticism, and pressure to conform to platform norms. Yet, they still persisted in their content creation, reflecting on their personal intentions and motivations for pursuing a public persona. For the women I spoke with (and likely many others in similar circumstances), their participation on social media serves as a meaningful, creative, relational, and embodied process, while also allowing them to develop new skills and boost their resumes.

In my conversations with participants, I explicitly asked whether they considered their content creation as (the colloquial definition of) work. “I’ve always sort of viewed my channel as my source for creativity and fun,” Taylor expressed. Margaret echoed this, characterizing her YouTube channel as “fun” and “like a hobby,” which she separated from her paid work for clients.⁴¹ Sharing this sentiment that producing online content is leisurely and/or enjoyable, Elena simply stated that “I do not consider it my work.” While she enjoyed helping people by sharing her advice and experiences online, she linked the notion of work to income, something she did not really focus on when creating. Although one participant (Sofia) was more focused on sponsorships than others and was hoping her blog would ultimately generate “passive income,” even she emphasized creativity, fun, and passion, musing,

they say like, when you love what you do, you’re never really working. So... for me like, making videos or making blogs or like, even editing photos...for me it just takes me into this like, happy place. It takes me into this zone where I can just forget about like, all of my other problems and just...focus on, you know, writing, or making a video, or making a photo because I truly love what I create and I also hope that other people like what I create as well.

Of course, creators also allude to the labor taking place behind the scenes that “people don’t...realize” can be taxing. Elena’s insistence that she does “not consider it my work” while acknowledging the long hours and effort she puts into creating videos illustrates the gendered contradictions of participating in the platform ecosystem. As with other forms of “nonproductive” labor, such as domestic and care work (Jarrett, 2014), the burden of long hours of editing, image management, and attempting to answer any/all questions from strangers are prerequisites to maintaining a public self. As Duffy and Elizabeth Wissinger (2017) argue in their discussion of the mythologizing of creative work on social media, “fun, self-expression, and creative freedom” are used to describe these career paths “gloss[ing] over a less-prodigious

⁴¹ Margaret is a freelance graphic designer, based in Korea and working with German clients.

reality, whereby worker-subjects must engage in persistent emotional labor, continuous reputation management and self-branding, and the presentation of an entrepreneurial subject who does it all” (p. 4657). Even when creators do not make the conscious choice to monetize their content, they are still working within a system that rewards over-work, self-discipline, and the commodification of feeling.

That said, it would be shortsighted to dismiss the ways in which my interviewees approach their own public participation on social media; after all, with little to none of their income depending upon their production, they could quite easily opt out of continuing to post public-facing content. Sofia’s claim that making videos and editing photos takes her to her “happy place” does reflect the “persistent performance of sentiment” that Duffy and Wissinger (2017) describe as a requirement for content creators (and particularly women). While downplaying the laborious tasks consistently required of them, creators constantly perform positivity, describe their production as a hobby, and “routinely cast their professions as work that does not seem like work” (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 4657).

At the same time, Sofia does not just describe her creation as “fun” or frivolous, but also notes that creating “takes me into this zone where I can just forget about like, all of my other problems and just...focus.” Positive psychologists have related pleasure and meaning with individuals’ participation in activities that allow them to achieve a “flow” state (Von Cullen et al., 2014), to achieve that “zone” of “focus” that Sofia describes. Flow is characterized by intense concentration on activities that are later described as enjoyable, and as Von Cullen and colleagues (2014) note, this feeling of pleasure is integral to individuals’ happiness. These scholars also point out that the pursuit of *immediate* pleasure does not necessarily result in sustained engagement in a particular activity or line of work, whereas individuals who seek

engagement and meaning were more likely to persevere (Von Cullen et al., 2014). Additionally, psychologists have linked making art (which, I argue, content creators - particularly smaller ones - are doing) with flow, noting that moments “when time feels suspended” are beneficial aspects of art therapy (Wilkinson & Chilton, 2013). While my scholarship is not rooted in psychology, nor did my interviewees speak at length about their own perseverance in their work, the extent to which content creators can experience flow suggests how creation can be both fulfilling in and of itself; it is the process,⁴² rather than the product that can be the most meaningful.

“I *do* actually kind of enjoy the process - and I'd say it's like my hobby... I would say like, traveling and making the videos about it is my hobby, so – I like it,” Brooke responded when asked about how her making videos complemented her work/life balance. Rather than commenting on how proud she was of the quality or success of her videos, Brooke emphasized her amateurism, focusing instead on “creativity” as a motivating factor. “I just stopped like, caring what people thought of me,” and when this occurred, she could focus on the process over the product. Lucy voiced a very similar perspective when I asked what motivated her to make videos. “It’s increasingly been the creative process. Like I didn’t think I’d really like [it] at first because I fucking hated editing...but I’ve gotten really into experimenting.” With the attention of a massive audience or a guaranteed stream of income at stake, Lucy would likely not be able to approach making videos with as much flexibility and confidence to “experiment.” “It’s not that I don’t care what they [the audience] want,” she said, speaking to internal versus external inspiration for what she chooses to film, “I care about helping them, but I really just want to put

⁴² For the audience, their own processes of reading/viewing content and meaning-making, as well as social interaction (with other audience members and/or with the creator), may not always evoke a flow state (though, certainly one can “get lost” in media) but can also be pleasurable and have a lasting impact. While I have not measured this by any means, I have frequently lost track of time while being endlessly absorbed in vlogs of other people’s lives. Consuming media can engage the senses and immerse one in another world, a process that goes beyond the exchange/use value of media as a commodity.

out what I want to put out.” We agreed that it was probably difficult for “celebrity level” influencers to constantly try to accommodate their audiences, which led to Lucy arguing that, for her, “it’s just better to ignore the views.” By worrying less about what others might think or how videos might perform, Lucy is able to enjoy her process.

To some extent, this focus on process contradicts the capitalist motivation of production with the goal of monetary exchange and capital accumulation. My interviewees were proud of their content not necessarily when they achieved the most views, gained more subscribers, or obtained sought-after sponsorships, but instead when they felt somehow personally connected to what they made. When I asked Eva about which blog post she was the most proud of, she laughed and admitted that her “favorite post isn’t actually related to Korea,” but was instead a travel guide of sorts for her hometown of Helsinki, Finland. “It was pretty extensive, so I’m pretty happy about that one,” she said, “I made a similar post about London a few more months back...so basically, any long list dedicated to a city is my favorite kind of post. It takes a lot of time to create that kind of content. It takes a lot of research on top of like, personal experiences.” She admitted that her “most popular” posts were probably something else, and that if she considered her target audience more seriously “it would be easier to get popular faster.” However, “it would also kill my creativity and...maybe not make it as enjoyable as if I just like, write from the heart.” Similar to Brooke’s and Lucy’s rejection of the external judgment of others, Eva’s desire to pursue joy in her work indicates her prioritization of the creative process over the final product to be packaged and “sold” to a particular audience.

Elizabeth similarly acknowledged “pressure” to conform to others’ (imagined) expectations about her posts as her audience grew, but dismissed this pressure as “small” and “silly,” since “at the end of the day, it’s still my experience.” Elizabeth pointed out that the

pressures surrounding content creation stemmed from the need to produce media that is “sellable to businesses,” rather than that which fulfills her creatively and/or relationally. Businesses may want to encourage creators to think about their social media as work so they will be more likely to feel less personally connected to what they produce, thus opening themselves to the possibility of advertisements and product placements. Elizabeth explicitly stated, however, “I don’t define it as work.” She did go on to admit that she did “treat it like work” to the extent that she makes a schedule for herself to ensure that she is “doing something after work so I’m not going home and taking a nap or something like that.” While on one hand, Elizabeth’s tendency to keep herself busy can be read as an extension of the capitalist mantra of “hustle culture,” or the need to always be working. At the same time, she is specifically dedicating time for something she enjoys, something creative (Elizabeth was specifically passionate about photography), and something that connects her to people all over the world. Elizabeth not only mentioned the number of other foreigners in Korea she had met through social media, who later became genuine friends, but also noted the complementary messages she received from followers in the U.S. (Ohio) and Greece. Like others, Elizabeth ultimately prioritized her own creativity and human connection over aspirations of corporate sponsorships, fame, profit, or making social media her full time job.

One of the key ways in which all of my interviewees approached their content creation was with an eye on future success, especially if that success was not directly correlated with the promotion of their self-brand. That is, that by honing their skills in filming, editing, or even strategies for search engine optimization, and by cultivating a positive public image, they would appeal to future potential employers. “I want to work in social media marketing for a company and I’d like to not be in front of the camera,” Lucy said, “so I decided to do YouTube so I can

edit...I'm trying to diversify my skills." These aspirations were not connected (necessarily) to her being in Korea, as she mentioned that her options as a foreigner were "slim." "That's [hiring English speakers] not really something that they're [Korean companies] looking towards," she said, "especially from foreigners at the moment. So that's not really feasible for me." These limitations did not seem especially frustrating for Lucy, who was working as an EPIK⁴³ English teacher part-time, as she enjoyed being in Korea for the time being while also working toward larger career goals. The idea that current creative work will result in future success is reminiscent of aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017); by honing skills like editing, filming, marketing, and storytelling now, creators could boost their resumes and ensure success later.

Another defining characteristic of aspirational labor is its emergence "amidst widespread uncertainty about the future of work alongside technologies that promise creative fulfillment" (Duffy, 2017, p. 11). Not only do new technologies transform employment and the way people do their work, but as I have discussed, content creators must follow the terms set by social media platforms if they want their content to be seen. However, for my interviewees, the uncertainty of working on platforms (because it was not something most of them were planning to get paid for) was less of a concern than the uncertainty that came with being a foreigner - and especially a foreign English teacher - in Korea. As such, content creation could be a more fulfilling component to daily life, and could actually serve as a more stable, grounding activity because it was so entwined with personal experiences. This was likely the case for Taylor, who was forced into teaching English after she was denied a position as an SNS⁴⁴ manager at the last minute. "I

⁴³ EPIK (English Program in Korea) is one of the primary intermediary organizations that recruits and matches individuals with teaching jobs in Korea. As per the current EPIK website (epik.go.kr), the requirements to apply are: be a citizen of a country where English is the primary language, have a bachelor's degree, "be mentally and physically healthy," "have a good command of the English language," and "have the ability and willingness to adapt to Korean culture and life." This latter requirement is particularly vague and could be read as a veiled appeal to multiculturalism via assimilation (see: Walton, 2020).

⁴⁴ Social networking service

had been more or less hired...and everything was set for me to work there. But the CEO backed out of sponsoring my visa at the last minute,” she said, “So I was basically left with like two or three weeks left on my visa and with my funds running out ‘cause I was just a student that I was like, I need a job, I need a job fast.” “It’s like, English teacher or nothing,” Taylor continued, “companies don’t want to sponsor visas. They don’t want to hire foreigners.” Although these women can leverage their marketable identities to gain somewhat reliable employment for the time being, the implication that their worth as residents is primarily determined by their capacity to teach children English is problematic.⁴⁵ In Korea, English is viewed as “the language of global competitiveness,” as it was integral to the nation’s recovery after the economic downturn and maintained an active role in the global economy thereafter (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 24). One’s ability to speak English provides them with the linguistic capital necessary to become an active neoliberal subject whose language ability is evidence of their tenacious personal development (Park & Lo, 2012). As such, we might understand English teachers from Western countries as precarious laborers who are primarily valuable for what they can offer to bolster Korea’s future global workforce.

Content creation is not just a means to an end, but the process of making - be it filmed, written, or photographed - and the process of connecting - with new friends, acquaintances, prospective travelers, and even potential employers - are what make participation in social media spaces worthwhile for creators. Relatedly, the processes involved in “consumption” are not simply passive entertainment; audiences watch and comment on videos, connect with one

⁴⁵ That said, I also want to make clear that one can also argue that some foreign residents may take advantage of this system. Being guaranteed relatively stable employment, housing, and a unique experience abroad can be an extremely appealing option for individuals who have recently received their undergraduate degrees, particularly because there is little need to speak Korean or to know anything about Korea/n culture. Teachers who *want* to learn Korean and try to assimilate are often not afforded the time to do so, but many teachers may make no effort to do so insofar as they understand their time to be limited.

another in comment sections, engage directly with creators, see their own posts re-circulated through creators' Instagram Stories,⁴⁶ and experience vicariously the lives of others all over the world. Platforms and government organizations instead, by necessity, focus largely on the product, because that is all that is tangible, that is what is measurable (by number of views, number of clicks), and that is what generates value for institutions. While platforms in particular have done their best to capitalize on emotional labor - and have certainly succeeded, as numerous scholars have pointed out - the emotions tied to the processes of the production/consumption of creative work cannot be wholly co-opted. Feelings of success, pride, intimacy, connection, inspiration, fulfillment, excitement, and even ordinariness can motivate creators to continue to work within systems that may pressure them to conform to certain behavioral norms. The final section of this chapter wraps up my discussion of creators' approaches to and motivations for their participation on social media and sets the tone for the chapters that follow.

Communication and Connection through Virtual and Vicarious Travel

Foreigners' content about their lives in South Korea is dependent upon the global reach of platforms, and it is *always* linked to the tourism industry, as they provide helpful tutorials for navigating the subway and review their favorite local cafes. By capitalizing on the ways in which ordinary individuals already utilize social media to share their travels, the Korean tourism industry (and in turn, the national government) can build Korea's brand as modern, dynamic, multicultural, and open to all travelers and migrants. That said, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted any implication of open borders, halting the majority of travel altogether. For

⁴⁶ Cari and Farina do this regularly, but as I have followed all the creators I mention in this dissertation over the past year, nearly all of them have done this, creating a kind of circular engagement, rather than a unidirectional creator-to-viewer relationship.

prospective travelers, this impediment can make *virtual* travel - or that which is enabled through social media - more attractive than ever before.

In September 2020, the KTO launched another hashtag campaign, the aspirational #TakeMeBacktoKorea, which asked people to publicly reminisce about their time spent abroad while the pandemic keeps them at home. Two months later, the New York office of the KTO sponsored “Discover Korea Live,” a “virtual experience” broadcast live on YouTube aiming to “celebrate life and culture.”⁴⁷ Among the event’s various eclectic special guests were vloggers Whitneybae (a Black American YouTuber whose vlogs I analyze in the following chapters) and Adrienne Hill⁴⁸ (a White American YouTuber who has recently accrued a large following). Whitney was interviewed about her memories of Korea, detailing her favorite foods as clips of her vlogs played to highlight certain dishes, and recommended Hongdae as a vibrant neighborhood. Adrienne’s segment - broadcast from inside her apartment in Busan - focused on skincare, as she showed off each Korean product in her skincare routine. By featuring these testimonies that communicate the superficial delights of Korea, the KTO leverages both the power of experiential knowledge, as well as the ability to connect to these women’s pre-established audiences. These YouTubers are positive, charismatic, and noncontroversial representatives of what life in Korea can be for foreigners, and their brief inclusion in this tourism campaign bolsters the national image as inclusive, innovative, and enticing.

Instances like these (and others I have described in this chapter) in which corporate and national interests converge are evidence of the ways in which content creators’ labor can be

⁴⁷ Quotes taken from the event’s promotional website at <https://discoverkorealive2020.com/>

⁴⁸ Adrienne’s channel is a prime example of a Korea-based vlog channel featuring an American creator. However, she only embarked on her journey as an English teacher in Busan post-graduation after I had already established the sample for my dissertation. That said, her rapid growth in viewer engagement and subsequent official recognition by KTO demonstrates further the relevance of this topic and “foreign” creators’ ties to nation branding more broadly.

commodified; while individual experiences and personalities take center stage, institutions are still in control. Creators' work occurs in a system that continues to advance neoliberal ideals of individual empowerment while benefiting powerful actors both locally (i.e., the Korean government, economy, and public image) and abroad (i.e., U.S.-owned and -operated platforms). "I don't want to be restricted creatively," Sofia told me, "I want to do it all because there's no limit to creativity...I don't want to be put in that little corner." These words exude an entrepreneurial ethos; Sofia is committed to her self-development, harnessing her own unlimited potential as a creator. By wanting to "do it all," she projects her position as an aspirational individual who hopes that her hard work will eventually pay off (Duffy, 2017). As creators like Sofia continue to work hard (and often for free), it is uncertain whether their content will appeal to audiences. Although there is no guarantee that creators will directly benefit from their productions through views or compensation, platforms *are* guaranteed to continue to thrive by accumulating user data. Additionally, as I have demonstrated through my discussion of the tourism industry and state-led multiculturalism, foreigners' public content about Korea always shapes the nation's global image.⁴⁹ Sofia's commitment to "navigat[ing] like a local," for example, allows her to turn her experiential knowledge into empowered production, while doing the heavy lifting for the Korean tourism industry without necessarily working with DMOs.

The glamorous "mythologies of creative work" entice creators to create "an image of fun, free, and authentic work that conceals its inauspicious realities" in a precarious platform ecosystem (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 4664). However, there are many individuals whose motivations for social media production diverge from aspirations to make a career out of this

⁴⁹ For better, or for worse. I also want to acknowledge that there are a plethora of YouTube videos and blog posts that discuss at length reasons individuals hate living in Korea, or that denigrate Korean culture. But even negatively valenced content can be viewed as authentic and can also serve to bring more global attention to (and interest in) Korea/n culture.

creative work, even explicitly distancing themselves from others who do hope to reach millions of subscribers or views. For (some) foreign women in Korea, who are navigating their scripted value as English teachers or shining multicultural representatives, their creative work can add a necessary complement to their lives and sense of belonging. When I asked Taylor about her favorite videos on her channel, she immediately mentioned storytimes, a popular genre on YouTube that harkens back to confessional-style webcam videos in which creators simply tell their viewers about something that happened to them. “With storytimes, I just get to sit down, just talk, and people just like to sit there and listen and we have discussions in the chat or in the comments,” she explained. With “casual” storytime videos, Taylor was able to avoid the pressures of conforming to certain standards set by YouTube’s cultural norms, and simply be herself. “People watch it ‘cause they like my personality,” she mused, “they like my talking, not because I have to look pretty or I have to be cool. They just like to just sit down and listen with me.” While we often think of content creation as an increasingly monetized game, in which creators compete for attention and aspire to achieve fame and/or fortune,⁵⁰ Taylor speaks to a core component of creative work: communication. “I know a lot of people feel strongly,” she went on, discussing her relationship with social media, “like, ‘people on Instagram are so fake...it hurts your confidence, it hurts your self-esteem’...but Instagram has brought me closer to a lot of people, too. And so has YouTube.”

As a critical researcher, I am tempted to lean into the numerous anti-capitalist critiques that point out the power imbalances between individuals and institutions; taking individual users’ experiences at face value risks over-generalization and an overly optimistic view of social media

⁵⁰ Which, to some extent, is absolutely true. The Logan Pauls of the Internet are perhaps participating on the polar opposite side of the spectrum from the women whose experiences I speak to in this dissertation. But it is important to remember that content creators are indeed on a *spectrum*, and that we cannot simply lump together all vloggers into a singular category.

which has often proved itself to do more harm than good.⁵¹ At the same time, it is important that we take seriously the glimmers and glints of creative and cultural work that occurs within capitalist systems, but that is not so easily subsumed into the global market. While critical of the exploitation of “women’s work,” Jarrett (2014) also alludes to the potentials for immaterial and/or affective labor to be transformative, to work within capitalism while “transforming the notion of capitalist accumulation itself” (p. 26). While following standards set by the market (e.g., “I am supposed to be positive online” or “My Instagram post must have these tags to receive adequate engagement”) fuels the cycle of capitalism in the digital economy, there are certainly alternative ways of thinking/being on social media, and it is possible to hold the contradictions of online participation simultaneously.

In July 2020, at the height of the pandemic and prior to the launch of #TakeMeBacktoKorea’s virtual reminiscence, Imagine Your Korea (the KTO’s official YouTube channel) began posting videos with the phrase “Our Hearts are Always Open.” The first promotional video, which received over ten million views, begins in an airplane hangar in which a Korean Air plane is parked. Upbeat jazz piano plays over a series of brief first-person shots of doors opening: first those of the hangar, then a hotel, a cafe, a flower shop, and finally a *hanok*, a traditional Korean house. “We’re opening our hearts,” a masculine voiceover says in English, “waiting for a safe and healthy world. We keep our hearts open.” Shortly after this video was published, subsequent videos (using #OurHeartsareAlwaysOpen) were released with the title “Imaginary Hug Campaign.” These short videos (six in total) depict a foreigner⁵² in Korea

⁵¹ In re-drafting this chapter, I have been enthralled in journalist Andrew Marantz’s (2019) book, *Anti-Social: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation*, which follows the trajectory of political polarization, toxic trolling culture, and the rise of violent hate speech perpetuated by the alt-right (and general cesspools of the Internet (e.g., 4chan, 8chan)).

⁵² These individuals come from the U.S., Vietnam, Indonesia, China, and Russia.

greeting their loved ones abroad and giving them a virtual hug. By leveraging a kind of universal pathos, the KTO helps to create a national brand that speaks to Korea's cosmopolitan orientation; we are all in this together, united as a global community. Particularly when it is communicated as part of a brand campaign, cosmopolitanism can "erase difference through the rhetoric of global citizenship, and it works to regressively hide race and racism" (Roberts, as cited in Oh, 2020, p. 265). By insisting upon our similarities and projecting an acceptance of individuals from everywhere, Korea can gloss over inequities and continue to purport its discourse of multiculturalism.

In the first of this series, a young blonde woman from the United States sits in her kitchen and speaks directly to the camera ("Hi Mom and Dad!"), expressing her sadness over travel restrictions and wishing her parents could come to Korea to celebrate the birth of their grandchild. This video connects this woman with her parents (and a global audience of prospective travelers), regardless of geographical distance, and relies on an appeal to (and commodification of) emotion. But it is also telling that this video is filmed in a domestic space. Most apparently, the young woman being at home makes her relatable to all citizens who have been told to stay at home and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Domestic spaces offer shelter from the outside world, but they are also associated with the intimate, the private, the details of our lives only visible to those with whom we live. To be invited into one's home as a guest is often to be offered a temporary glimpse into the deeply personal. These glimpses become even more intriguing as they occur across national and cultural boundaries through the production of YouTube vlogs. The tourism industry's commodification of individual foreigners' experiences reaches for universal similarities. However, in their own videos documenting living spaces, "ordinary" content creators embody a cosmopolitan subjectivity that rejects any fixed

national/cultural essence and a superficial movement beyond difference. In the next chapter, I begin my analysis of YouTube videos by examining virtual tours of domestic space. In doing so, I examine the productions of foreign women in Korea whose creative work connects them to their viewers through affect, intimacy, and ordinariness, ultimately reframing what it means to belong in Korea and the meaning of content beyond its commercial value.

Chapter Two: Feeling at Home: Intimacy, Hospitality, and Cosmopolitanism in Tours of Domestic Space

This chapter focuses on tours of apartments, *goshiwons*,⁵³ and guesthouses⁵⁴ on YouTube and the ways in which Western creators in South Korea situate themselves and connect with others within domestic space. I have chosen to focus on tours of living spaces because they are one of the most watched and most requested videos when it comes to vlogging in Korea. Of the creators whose videos are part of my primary sample of texts, all of them have casually filmed themselves inside their homes, but those who have explicitly designated particular videos as *tours* (often accompanied by a price tag) have received millions of views. This viewership is certainly outside the norm; at the time of data collection, the tour of every detail of Kali's affordable *goshiwon* received over two million more views than her second most popular video, "FIRST DAY AT A KOREAN UNIVERSITY." Rachel's viewership is even more significant: her most popular videos generally receive 15-20K views, but her top video, "New Seoul Apartment Tour (\$800)," has received over one million views.

The popularity of these videos is in part due to strategically adhering to platform logics, as tagged keywords like "apartment tour" prompt the algorithm to offer this content to viewers who may not even be seeking out tours in Korea specifically. However, I am not concerned with *why* these videos are popular, but rather *what* these videos communicate, *who* benefits from their production, and *how* and *to what end* vloggers-as-hosts connect with global audiences. Through an analysis of videos that fit within this subgenre of lifestyle content,⁵⁵ this chapter argues for a

⁵³ KOR: 고시원: A very small, very cheap one room living space, often rented by students.

⁵⁴ I use the term "guesthouse" here to encompass places that are meant for temporary, short-term stay (e.g., Airbnbs, hotels, and/or hostels).

⁵⁵ There are eight total videos in my sample that fit this description; Whitney is the only creator without a tour video (but with many lifestyle vlogs). Whitney (like all other creators) does film herself inside her apartment frequently, just never in a way that is presented as a guided tour.

reconsideration of cosmopolitan subjectivity as a gendered mode of self-presentation and transnational connection. It is through virtual tours of domestic space, which blur the boundaries of the public and private, global and local, and foreign and familiar, that cosmopolitanism becomes not merely openness toward others, but an embrace and integration of “otherness” into the “host’s” (and in turn, the guests’) sense of self.

The home has not only been a popular setting for vlogging on YouTube (Hillrichs, 2016), but *tours* of homes have become a genre all their own (Rebane, 2019). Abidin (2019) considers home tour vlogs in an East Asian context, emphasizing “hanging out at home” as a lifestyle tied to class. Creators who document and upload their slow living at home communicate a mindful escape from the bustle of modern urban life, showing off a leisure class privilege not only characterized by homebound recreation, but also practices of housekeeping (Abidin, 2019). For cultural studies scholar Gala Rebane (2019), housekeeping is a practice reminiscent of European women’s duties of “making the parlour.” Rebane’s (2019) analysis of room tours produced by predominantly young women emphasizes their gendered dimensions. Viewed as an extension of (White, middle-/upper-class) women’s labor of homemaking as a display of symbolic capital, this genre is an instance of “formalized guest reception” in which YouTubers produce private and social spaces in which to host their viewers (Rebane, 2019). These gendered elements of tour vlogs are also present in the videos that inform this chapter; for example, details of the space are presented meticulously by an autonomous feminine subject in a way that communicates comfort and positivity (Rebane, 2019). But I also take into consideration the virtual border crossing that occurs as non-Korean individuals take on roles as hosts and relate to/with viewers who are also not necessarily from (or familiar with) Korea.

Through her presentation of positive affect and revelation of personal details, the vlogger cultivates intimacy with her viewers. In their discussion of female YouTubers' maintenance of intimacy and trust with their audiences, Lidia Marôpo, Ana Jorge, and Renata Tomaz (2020) found that intimacy is "strongly anchored in the exhibition of domestic scenarios and daily life experiences" (p. 28). While the latter emphasis on daily life in relation to my sample unfolds in Chapter Three, creators' tour videos slow down to emphasize the minutiae of domestic spaces and in turn, foster intimacy. Social media scholars have discussed how intimacy can act as currency and benefit brands and platforms (Marôpo et al., 2020; Raun, 2018), and while this is a worthwhile interrogation, I consider the ways in which intimacy can also benefit creators and their viewers. When foreign women share tours of domestic space, they foster intimate connections not only between themselves and their viewers, but also with Korea. By taking on the role of host, these women implicitly emphasize that they belong in Korea, while still maintaining their belonging elsewhere. By communicating her belonging in multiple physical and cultural spaces simultaneously, the vlogger embodies a cosmopolitan subjectivity that is inclusive of difference, which can promote a rethinking of how we determine who belongs where.

Historically, cosmopolitanism has implied a transcendent and "objective" morality perpetuated and embodied by a universal citizen of the world (Mendieta, 2009). But as philosopher Eduardo Mendieta (2009) writes, "cosmopolitanism is born out of privileges: economic; political; cultural; and even linguistic" (p. 242). This is also the case for some individuals who document and share their international excursions online. For example, Kris Hyesoo Lee (2020) discusses how students from Western countries studying abroad in China constructed themselves as "consumers and producers of discursive images of privileged and

racialised cosmopolitanism” (p. 10). By essentializing difference and framing China as “exotic” and “bizarre,” these students distinguished China as “Other” while also signifying and celebrating their own journeys of self-discovery and newfound cosmopolitanism (Lee, 2020). Similarly, in their analysis of vlogs by White Canadian YouTubers Simon and Martina (*EatYourKimchi*), Oh & Oh (2017) critique the ways in which the couple “make[s] claims to cosmopolitanism” through everyday acts such as eating and enjoying “exotic” foods, while essentializing racialized difference of Korea/ns. That is, their superficial appreciation of a country/culture allows these White expats to “consume the other” (hooks, 1992) on their own terms, thus ultimately rejecting a hybridity that may put Western superiority at risk (Oh & Oh, 2017, p. 707). When creators from Western countries claim authority and space in South Korea, they always carry with them the weight of colonization; although the creators I discuss here are not all White, their national, cultural, and linguistic origins position them within the framework of colonial legacies of domination. Some of the underlying discourses of colonialism are addressed at greater length in my concluding chapter, and while this discussion could be expanded into its own robust study, this is not the focus of my dissertation. Instead, I consider how conceptualizations of “new” cosmopolitanism can help illuminate alternative and user-centered understandings of social media’s transnational, affective, and feminist/feminine functions.

In the sections that follow, I provide readings of tour vlogs as exemplary texts that create and maintain transnational connections through intimacy, relatability, and hospitality. While interview data can provide insight into creators’ lived experiences, textual analyses in Chapters Two and Three shifts the focus to representation. Analyzing media texts helps answer questions regarding the communicative functions of representation: how do creators represent themselves

and their experiences in online content? What work does their content do, and how does it meaningfully connect to audiences across national and cultural boundaries? In this chapter, I argue that through their roles as hosts, vloggers embody a feminist/feminine subjectivity that reflects that of the new cosmopolitan subject; rather than essentializing and distancing themselves from Korea/n culture, these women situate themselves within it, existing in a space between their nation of origin and their current location. This perspective conceptualizes a new cosmopolitanism that is inclusive of difference (Rajan & Sharma, 2006), rooted in multiplicity, and reliant upon feminist hospitality (Hamington, 2010). These creators cannot escape the colonial undertones of their content creation (see: Conclusion), and they still carry a wealth of privileges as English-speaking women from Western countries (some of whom are also White). Nevertheless, by neither explicitly valuing one culture over another nor attempting to essentialize or exoticize difference, these content creators also exist as distinctly cosmopolitan hosts. This understanding of cosmopolitanism “acknowledges its rootedness, its materiality in certain institutions and histories” and has the potential to generate affect, solidarity, and active openness toward the other (Mendieta, 2009, p. 253). In the next section, I highlight the ways in which affect is mobilized through tours of domestic space by considering theories of intimate publics and gendered hospitality.

Building the Host/Guest Relationship through Hospitality and Intimacy

“Hey guys,” Cari greets her audience, standing in front of a blue apartment door, “So it has finally been about a week since I have moved into my new apartment. So I wanted to show you around.” She refers back to a video she made previously of the same empty apartment after she purchased it, inviting viewers to watch that first (if they have not already), to ensure they are up-to-date with this life transition. After some exposition regarding her neighborhood and

budget, she begins a detailed tour, starting with the tiled entryway floor and ending with shaky shots of herself as she points to the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to her walls. The details of this tour are minute and relatively mundane, but the video exemplifies Cari's willingness to show and tell. While the apartment itself is clearly the topic of the video, denoted in the title ("\$400 Korean Apartment Tour"), category ("Howto & Style"), and keywords ("seoul," "gangnam," "apartment," etc.), Cari is the focus. She chats casually to the camera as though talking to a friend, and like any good host, she invites her viewers to make themselves at home. Cari's geniality does not go unnoticed by her viewers; one commenter remarks, "I am fascinated by the fact that you're so honest and you just give off a really friendly and funny vibe~," while another notes, "The way you talk in your videos is really nice, since you seem genuinely friendly and kind :D" By being "honest" and "genuine," Cari meets the standard criteria for YouTube vlogging, a format which is characterized by legible "authenticity" and conversationality (Burgess & Green, 2009; Tolson, 2010). However, by praising her as "friendly and kind," Cari's commenters also allude to key ways in which vloggers-as-hosts relate to their "guests": through the performance of hospitality and the cultivation of intimacy.

As Cari guides us through her one room apartment, we see her possessions and where she cooks, and as each personal detail of living is revealed, we feel somehow closer to her. "Now perhaps you're wondering, 'but Cari, where do you sleep?'" she happily chats, filming a large gray couch in front of her, "Well, guys, look at this." A jump cut to a stable frame allows the audience to watch Cari from across the room as she drags away a small wooden table. The process, which has been accelerated in post-production, eventually ends with her revealing a pull-out section of the couch which has now transformed into a mattress. Cari collapses onto the mattress and, while she is sprawled across the cushions, tells her viewers how she received the

couch as a gift from a coworker (See: Figure 6). Her laid-back posture accents her explanation of this otherwise irrelevant detail, fostering a feeling of intimacy, “an important and necessary signifier” of the vlog itself and the relationship between the creator and her audience (Raun, 2018, p. 101). For creators who temporarily perform the role of host in their own living spaces, they cultivate intimacy not only by revealing details of their lives verbally, but also visually and materially as they walk their audiences through the private space.

In his work on the affective labor of vlogging, Tobias Raun (2018) argues that intimacy disrupts the traditional distinction between public and private; by communicating personal details to their audiences, microcelebrities perform a public-private self. In Raun’s (2018) case study of transgender vlogger Julie Vu, the public-private self is revealed both verbally through her disclosure of deeply personal life experiences, and visually by exposing parts of her physical body and discussing her transition. Through repeated self-disclosure and socializing with large dispersed publics, “intimacy becomes a currency” (Raun, 2018, p. 108). Of course, the public-private self presented by foreign women in Korea is categorically different from transgender vloggers, but Raun’s (2018) discussion⁵⁶ helps clarify the central role of intimacy on social media. Tour vlogs like Cari’s cultivate intimacy by her casual interaction with viewers, as she shares explanations about personal possessions and provides insight into mundane life in Korea. These features of vlogs boost the creator’s credibility and authenticity, and the creator becomes more connected to her audience (regardless of their social, cultural, and/or geographic location) through her continual interactions with them.

⁵⁶ Numerous other scholars have also touched on the role of intimacy on social media, particularly in regard to how it is/can be commodified (see: Abidin, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy, 2017).



Figure 6: Cari sprawls out across her pull-out couch | “\$400 Korean Apartment Tour | Seoul, Gangnam” (October 11, 2016)

As Cari reaches her bathroom, tucked away behind a tiny door in the middle of her apartment, she provides a quick overview of the standard decor: tile flooring, toilet, washing machine, sink. She begins flipping through colorful packages balanced precariously over the sink: “And then I have um, some face masks that friends gave me...and this!” she notes emphatically, pausing at a bright pink package containing a hair mask, “which we’re going to try together because I have heard fantastic things about this.” Her insistence on “try[ing] this together” implies a closeness with her viewers, that they too share an interest in beauty products and that, through viewing, they will be able to experience it with her. This sense of “togetherness” is grounded in a mutual affinity for both the product (skincare) and for Cari’s lifestyle and well-being, and togetherness is constructed through interaction. Unlike fictional film or television, vlogs that provide some representation of reality (even when that reality is filtered and curated) center the interactive/interpersonal modes of media as the creator regularly

engages viewers through her speech patterns, word choice, and bodily movements.⁵⁷ Cari's interaction with the setting and material objects is also a communicative event, and by linking her viewers to an object - verbally and through gesture - and communicating positive affect, she makes them feel at home in the space.

While some apartment tours on YouTube simply pan the expanse of various rooms, playing a standard, copyright-free jingle over footage of a de-contextualized living space, Cari's production is anything but passive. Her center-stage performance as a host and tour guide requires her to be actively aware of how she is relating to her viewers emotionally by mobilizing the "right feelings" (Gill & Kanai, 2018), in this case those which communicate care for her viewers' interests and incorporate them into her life narrative. To successfully demonstrate their hospitality, scholars have pointed out that hosts must prioritize their guests' well-being and enjoyment above all else (Lashley, 2015). By continuing to invite viewers to come along with them as they guide them through a domestic space, vloggers signify their roles as good hosts.

While the altruism implied by the prioritization of the visitor implies a hierarchical distinction between host and guest,⁵⁸ that these interactions take place on social media means that the relationship is more reciprocal. That is, the host reveals her private life and the guests provide consistent social engagement in the form of views, comments, likes, and subscribes, fueling content creation. This nonhierarchical understanding of hospitality, as feminist ethicist Maurice Hamington (2010) argues, "reflects a performative extension of care ethics that seeks to knit together and strengthen social bonds through psychic and material sharing" (pp. 23-24). Feminist hospitality insinuates a meaningful disruption of the lives of both host and guest that

⁵⁷ I explore interactivity and the body further in Chapter Three.

⁵⁸ A similar hierarchy is implied when creators are called "influencers." Being an "influencer" signifies a more unidirectional relationship to one's audience, despite creators needing and gaining much from their audience in terms of both visibility and (sometimes) profit, as well as social support.

often results in a mutual benefit (Hamington, 2010). Cari demonstrates her localized knowledge (e.g., housing costs, standard features of Korean apartments, etc.) throughout her video, which positions her as an authority figure. However, she presents herself in a way that is down-to-earth and willing to share personal details (such as her book collection) and imperfections (she has not hung her mirror on the wall and her possessions by no means neatly organized). This mode of self-presentation communicates that she may live in Korea, but that that life is not to be glamorized; regardless of physical distance, the host and her guests are ultimately similar people.

Feminist approaches to hospitality require that these spaces of belonging are not only rooted in similarity, however; they also emphasize living with and incorporating difference. Feminist hospitality inherently emphasizes reciprocity and inclusion and is a “performative act of identity” that does not uphold boundaries between self and Other, but is instead “located in interaction” (Hamington, 2010). Although the hospitality performed by Westerners as hosts in Korea is not an ahistorical act, it can produce spaces of belonging for both vloggers and viewers that traverse national boundaries. In the next section, I continue to discuss Cari’s apartment tour alongside a tour of Kali’s *goshiwon* and how tours of domestic spaces give rise to transnational intimate publics.

Intimate Publics and Emotional Attachments

The term “intimate public,” originally coined by Lauren Berlant (2008) in her study of mainstream women’s culture, captures the “affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness” in which women could feel central. While Berlant (2008) primarily examines escapism via the consumption of U.S. popular culture (thus emphasizing the centrality of White liberal hetero-femininity), numerous scholars have extended the notion of intimate publics to show how deeper social connections and feelings

of identification are enabled through the use of digital/social media (Dobson, Carah, & Robards, 2018; Henderson & Taylor 2020; Kanai, 2017). In her work on women's digital culture and "girlfriendship," Akane Kanai (2017) addresses the ways in which feelings of sameness and belonging are constituted through the production of "affective relatability" (p. 6). Kanai's (2017) bloggers, whose posts make comedic the everyday experiences of young women via memes, re-tell their personal exploits as generic and commonly shared. In doing so, they cultivate an intimate public which fosters feelings of connection and sameness. The creators whose tours I examine throughout this chapter similarly foster the formation of intimate publics through their gendered self-presentation and performances as good hosts. This is a crucial component of transnational communication, as feelings of sameness still so often stop at national and/or cultural borders.

Still in her bathroom, Cari continues to briefly describe various aspects of the space until she arrives at a hanging orange and pink bath towel. Her hand appears on screen, grabbing at the towel as she tells its story: it was passed down to her from her "best friend, Kayla" who also received it as a gift. "So really, this is like the Sisterhood of the Traveling...Bath Towel," Cari jokes, alluding to the popular American book/film series in which four young women share a pair of pants, which magically fit each of their differently sized bodies, to stay connected in their summer apart.⁵⁹ This reference - which, presumably, is understood by her imagined audience - neatly parallels the "fantasy of feminine sameness" (Berlant, 2008) characteristic of the digital intimate public built through her audience-oriented rapport. Following a quick sequence in the dark in which Cari shows off a small bird-shaped light that shrouds her apartment in a red hue, she flips on the overhead light and continues to film her own close-up. Though she had already

⁵⁹ i.e., book (Brashares, 2001) and film (Kwapis, 2005) *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*

announced the ending of her apartment tour, she quickly points out some glow-in-the-dark stars that are barely visible on her white walls (“because, why not?”). “Anyway, yes, this is my home - yes, there is bubble wrap on my windows because that’s how people insulate their homes in Korea,” she glances around the room, still holding her camera in her outstretched hand.

“And...yeah! Thanks for being on this journey with me,” Cari refers back to her initial empty apartment tour, finally ending the nearly fourteen minute video with an acknowledgment of her viewers’ company and commitment.

There are many aspects of Cari’s apartment that she could denigrate;⁶⁰ the space has little natural light, there are bars lining the ground-floor windows, she does not have a bed, and the bathroom is cramped. Yet, she jovially hosts her virtual guests, and her narration puts a positive spin on each of these otherwise less-than-ideal elements. As Cari speaks directly to her viewers, incorporating them into a kind of imagined “sisterhood” of sameness,⁶¹ she communicates a commitment to identifying with the Other. When she thanks her viewers for “being on this journey with [her],” she reciprocates the feelings of connection expressed through views, likes, subscriptions, and comments. Viewers of apartment tours - and as I have noted, there are many - are welcomed into the once distant space by their hosts, as the boundaries between public and private dissolve. Women have traditionally been “unwilling hosts and unwelcome guests” (Hamington, 2010), and their labor inside the home - like the labor of vloggers - has been invisibilized and/or undervalued (Stivens, 2017). However, in these apartment tours, women claim their role as hosts quite blatantly, leveraging feminized practices, such as intimacy, care,

⁶⁰ Especially from an American perspective, typical aspects of many Korean apartments, such as the lack of an enclosed shower, conventional oven, and clothes dryer, may diverge from both one’s expectations and preferences.

⁶¹ By this I do not mean a sameness that eschews difference in identity per se, but instead this sameness is reflected through shared affinity and by sharing space, emotion, cultural references, etc. That said, because it prioritizes similarities tethered to *gender*, it certainly risks glossing over racialized difference by defaulting to whiteness as standard. And, of course, this does not function in exactly the same way for, say, Kali, as she is also American, but is mixed-race.

and relationality, to claim space and agency, and to generate value. These women not only provide their audience with information, like how to navigate the Korean rental market, but they also produce “intangible” products: “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 293). The products of positive feeling benefit viewers, as they allow them to temporarily experience life in Korea, and to belong to a community of like-minded others.

Kali’s “My \$230/Month Korean Room // GOSHIWON TOUR 🏠”⁶² opens with a black screen, contextualizing what the audience is about to see with three singular lines of white text: “welcome to my goshiwon tour / a goshiwon (고시원) is basically a ‘box room’ / other goshiwons can be a little different, but here is mine ENJOY!” DJ Quads’ “Little Dream,” a copyright-free track often heard in YouTube videos, plays in the background, dimming once Kali’s voiceover begins. “Hello,” she says softly, as the frame opens on a first-person shot of someone (Kali) walking upstairs, “today I’m going to be showing you around my room.” Interacting with her viewers each step of the way, she demonstrates how she must enter a password on a digital lock before she swings open a glass door and enters a cramped hallway. Once she arrives at her room and opens the door, the first things our eyes are drawn to are her laptop and headphones clumsily strewn across the wrinkled white sheets of her bed. Already, Kali’s tour diverges from the formal domestic hospitality in Rebane’s (2019) bedroom tours. Kali’s virtual guests are not presented with tasteful decorations of a cozy ambiance, but are instead greeted (via amateurish video captured on an iPhone) by an informal gesture of openness and intimacy. She has not staged her space in any obvious way; her mirror is smudged, a photo

⁶² At the time of writing, this video has over six million views, making it one of the most viewed tours of Western YouTubers in East Asia that I have come across. This view count is indicative of the significance that tour vlogs in particular can maintain after posting; documented in my initial data collection, Kali’s *goshiwon* tour had just over three million views in late 2019.

of her dog is haphazardly taped to the wall, and her snacks are unorganized, shoved into a cubby above her bed. Kali presents herself as approachable and ordinary, qualities to which her audience is likely to relate.

While intimacy is a valuable commodity on social media (Jerselv, 2016), it can also be a way to make people feel more connected to each other and to other places. In a discussion with humanities scholar Jay Prosser, Berlant (2011) remarks that her work on intimate publics has allowed her to think about the “flourishing logics of belonging that have, since the nineteenth century, been largely organized by the nation form” (p. 183). That is, while individuals with a shared nationality are often linked together as a(n imagined) community, the intimate public is linked through affect and “by a *sense* that there is a common emotional world” available to them (Berlant, 2008, p. 10). This conceptualization of belonging emerges through the production and consumption of tours of ordinary living spaces in South Korea. As Kali enters her room and kicks off her shoes, she continues to speak quietly - perhaps to her audience, but also to herself - “this is Korea, take yo shoes off,” and then pans across the space remarking “how cute” it is. She provides a balanced list of pros and cons and a brief justification of her choice of living arrangements at the end of the video (i.e., “i don’t have a refrigerator, but i do have my own bathroom. which was more important to me”). These characteristics of the space - its cuteness, its affordability, its personal bathroom - are presented as being similarly appealing to other people who may be interested in a long term stay in Korea. Although many of the top comments playfully disparage the room’s size (e.g., “Claustrophobia has entered the chat”), the imagined guests to whom Kali speaks in the video are constructed as sharing her values.

Digital media scholars Margaret Henderson & Anthea Taylor (2020) observe how Australian beauty vloggers do not foreground their national identities in their videos, but “instead

situate themselves more within a globalised collective of women.” By doing so, these beauty vloggers’ self-presentation suggests “a transnational way of making femininity intelligible and consumable” (p. 127). The creators whose videos I describe here do not cultivate a community explicitly centered on feminine empowerment, as do those discussed by Henderson & Taylor (2020), but they do appeal to a collective sense of ordinariness that crosses national and cultural boundaries. Kali is a mixed-race young woman who speaks English with an American accent, but she neither accentuates nor obscures her identity and the extent to which she belongs in Korea. She connects with her viewers through positive affect as she welcomes them into her private space, regardless of (but not in spite of) her racial, national, and cultural identities. Through their own ordinariness and the ordinariness of their domestic spaces (however interesting), creators like Kali and Cari in turn make *Korea* more ordinary and normalize their presence in the country. The next section extends my discussion of intimate connection and belonging to discuss a blurring of boundaries between the foreign and familiar.

In-Between the Foreign and Familiar: Transnationalism and Belonging in Space

As we virtually cross the domestic threshold as we enter one’s living space, we also temporarily cross the national (Korean) border. Kali’s “korean host family apartment tour” exemplifies this national/domestic border crossing as she guides her audience through the location of her homestay, presenting the space as if it is her own. After a brief introductory shot of the video’s title, Kali walks from off right into the frame of a stable shot inside her bedroom. She leans down toward the camera, chin playfully resting on her hand, and greets her audience, explaining that today is the day that she will show them her Korean host family’s apartment. As the tour begins, a cozy living room appears, curtains drawn over sliding glass doors through which daylight shines onto a large couch covered with a patchwork quilt. Audience and vlogger

perspectives converge through this first person shot and it feels as though the viewers are there with Kali as she walks them through the details of the space. The narrations that accompany close up shots of housewares and appliances contextualize domestic life (e.g., “she makes like, this purple rice, it is so freakin’ good”) (see: Figure 7), bringing the global audience into this intimate space and making them feel “at home.” Kali herself is a guest in this Korean family’s home, but here she takes on the role of host, disrupting assumptions of who belongs where and putting the potentially “foreign” in direct conversation with the familiar.



Figure 7: View of Kali’s homestay kitchen and living space. | “korean host family apartment tour” (April 9, 2019)



Figure 8: Opening shot of Cari's Daegu Airbnb tour | "\$500 Apartment Tour | Daegu, Korea" (September 4, 2018)

Cari's Daegu apartment tour, one of her most watched videos with over three million views, similarly positions her as a host in multiple locations that are not exactly her "home." As we are greeted by a "good morning" written across the screen in the opening shot, bouncy acoustic guitar music plays softly in the background (see: Figure 8). It is pleasant, inviting, and sets the tone for an introduction to a space that is already intriguing; the initial frame behind the text overlay is a downward shot of the apartment, primarily focused on floor to ceiling windows through which a quiet city sits below. As the music continues, there is a quick cut to a bedroom and Cari stretches her arms from underneath the plush white covers of a full bed, soon after tossing the covers aside. Another jump cut shows Cari in baggy shorts and a t-shirt, hair pulled back in a messy bun, walking down stairs from the bedroom loft to the ground floor. After a quick morning routine of brushing her teeth and making tea, the video finally settles on a stable

shot inside the combined living space and kitchen, Cari sitting in a pale blue dress, sipping tea and then directly addressing the camera.

It is important that this apartment is temporary for Cari as well as her viewer; though not explicitly noted in the title of the video, it is an Airbnb. Like Kali showing us around another family's home, Cari takes us through her Airbnb host's space in a display of hospitality that positions her as a cosmopolitan tour guide in a country in which she is still technically an "outsider." This links together the global and local and, like her apartment tour described in previous sections, constitutes a relationship with her audience that helps them feel like they might belong as well. Tethering this sense of belonging to the domestic space means more here than just inviting viewers to feel at home with these creators; it invites them to feel at home in the nation itself. As viewers are given the chance to gaze into others' private lives - that is, the lives of the family or Airbnb hosts who are not present - and upon their everyday objects, they are also allowed to envision themselves living in Korea.

When creators film their living spaces, it "accentuates the effects of the personal in the transnational viewing experience" (Swan, 2018, p. 558). For tours of spaces that creators themselves are renting and living in longer term, the visual and verbal revelation of personal/private details primarily strengthens the relationship between the creator (host) and the viewer (guest). As viewers are then invited into spaces in which the creator is also a guest - as is the case with a homestay or an Airbnb - the "personal" becomes blurry. While the creator is utilizing the space and its objects and still claiming her role as host, the viewer is aware that she does not necessarily own much of what she is showing. Videos that guide viewers through these particular domestic spaces instantiate the familiar colonial trope of individuals from Western

countries claiming space (and knowledge of that space) in the Orientalized East,⁶³ but they also further legitimize what constitutes the “real” Korea. Tours of places where non-Korean creators live showcase a *foreign* resident’s reality, but those that take viewers through spaces (presumed to be) owned by Koreans reveal a more localized perspective. This is not to say that one is more “authentic” - truly, not much differs in either context - but rather, that it is not entirely possible to disentangle the local from the global.

While Kali films with her iPhone in hand throughout the tour of her host family’s home, Cari also models for her viewers how to utilize the space. By including her morning routine and frequently filming herself from a tripod, she brings her body into focus and helps the audience envision how one might interact with the space. Similarly, in Farina Jo’s Airbnb tour video (“Our Apartment In Seoul | Room Tour Airbnb”), she models a real use of the apartment, despite only recently arriving there. “Good morning, everybody,” Farina Jo greets her audience, dressed and ready for the day after an evening of eating chicken wings in front of the camera, “So yesterday I told you that I will give you a quick little room tour, so today, let’s do it!” Lively music plays at the scene change, as the perspective pivots to first person and a hand appears, gently knocking on the door to the apartment. The door swings open and both the viewer and Farina (as the two perspectives converge via the first person shot) are greeted by a smiling Dongin who moves to the side as “we” enter the apartment, seeing first the entryway crowded with luggage and a line of shoes. While the video is short, it still subscribes to the conventions of the apartment tour genre: beginning at the entrance, consistent narration, and showing minute details of household objects within the space. As someone who is a tourist in Korea, rather than a resident, Farina’s performance as host in this temporary living space illustrates the ease with

⁶³ see: Conclusion

which these creators can demonstrate their belonging in the nation. Simultaneously, it provides viewers with a glimpse into a “real” Korean space, therefore blurring the boundaries between what constitutes the “foreign” and what is familiar. Turning toward tour videos produced by Iman and Rachel, the next section discusses how they incorporate Korea/n culture into and alongside their “home” cultural identities. In doing so, they communicate their own belonging in Korea characterized by multiplicity, rather than domination or assimilation, making them new cosmopolitan subjects.

Content Creators as Cosmopolitan Subjects

In her Itaewon guesthouse video, Iman takes on the role of vlogger-as-host in a way that illustrates the significance of new and/or critical cosmopolitanism’s rootedness and multiplicity. Cosmopolitanism has long been associated with mobility, as mobility allows one to more effectively claim their being a citizen of the world (Molz, 2005). But other scholars have shifted the focus of cosmopolitanism as a concept to instead incorporate rootedness, multiplicity, and the transformation of one’s self through interaction with the Other (Baban, 2006). By rejecting a singular vision of who counts as cosmopolitan, “new cosmopolitanism” blurs the boundaries of home and abroad through travel, but also through the uses of communication technologies. New cosmopolitanism allows one to “position themselves in motion between at least two homes, sometimes even through dual forms of citizenship, but always in multiple locations (through travel, or through cultural, racial, or linguistic modalities)” (Rajan & Sharma, 2006, p. 2). This turn toward rooted and multiple belongings requires that cosmopolitanism be viewed as distinctly embodied and affective (McSorley, 2015; Molz, 2006), rather than objective or transcendent. For non-Korean women living in, working in, or even traveling to Korea, it is important that they are able to perceive themselves as belonging there without necessarily having

to fully blend in or attempt to obscure their own cultural, national, racialized, and/or ethnic identities. This reconceptualization of who gets to be cosmopolitan - or, who gets to travel the world and be an active participant in other cultural spaces - is important because it can help us reimagine what it means to belong to a community more broadly.

Wearing a soft gray hijab and her usual full face of makeup, Iman prefaces her video with a forty-five second introduction to the space she will be showing off and its uniqueness as the first Muslim-catered guesthouse in Korea (see: Figure 9). After some general overview shots of the guesthouse's main living spaces, she notes from behind the camera, "So, now I'm going to take you on the tour..." and begins walking us through the common area, giving unscripted commentary as she shows off the space. Iman never obscures her racial or religious identity, rather she embraces it as part of her brand. Her tour of this particular domestic space - a place in which travelers of all kinds can seek temporary respite - exemplifies an in-betweenness, as its being Muslim-centered is an *addition* to Korea/n culture, rather than a rejection or cooptation of it. As she walks up a flight of concrete stairs, Iman reaches a small empty space which she points out is the area for prayer, complete with a shelf of "prayer rugs and the scarves and whatnot that you need." She then turns right and walks into a dorm-style room "that can accommodate eight girls," and continues the tour of where her viewers could eventually come to sleep and share the space. As with the other tours I have described, the guesthouse itself is a temporary in-between space in Korea, and Iman successfully cultivates a feeling of belonging through her positive affect and showing off intimate spaces.



Figure 9: Iman welcoming her audience and introducing her video | “Eid Guesthouse | The First Muslim-Catered Guesthouse is Itaewon, Seoul, Korea” (June 28, 2015)

Emphasizing the salience of feeling in encounters with otherness, cultural studies scholar Mica Nava (2007) offers “visceral” cosmopolitanism as a way to describe one’s attraction to and engagement with difference. Nava (2007) focuses on commodification and the British consumption of “Other” cultural products, but she argues that physical proximity to otherness - that is, that these products from elsewhere were being featured in one’s home - constituted a necessarily inclusive cosmopolitanism. Although Mari Yoshihara (2002) rightly problematizes American women’s ownership of Asian cultural products as a mode of power over the Eastern Other, Nava’s (2007) visceral cosmopolitanism turns toward the ways in which these products are incorporated into one’s sense of self. Modern cosmopolitanism, Nava (2007) argues, allowed women to become subjects through their purchasing power and to “appropriate the narratives about cultural and racial difference for themselves” (p. 6). I have not collected data on the audience reception of tour vlogs, but the consumption of these videos certainly has the potential

to provide a similar productive proximity to otherness. When viewers use their personal computers (presumably within their own homes, more often than not) to access and engage with videos that detail private spaces,⁶⁴ they bring that which would be otherwise global, distant, or “foreign” into their own personal, localized spaces.

When it comes to the presentation of self and space in tour vlogs, viewing cosmopolitanism as a structure of feeling, or “as an empathetic and inclusive set of identifications,” presents an alternative understanding of our relationship to otherness that is “not about the erosion of difference” (Nava, 2007, pp. 3-6). Despite the ways in which foreignness can be (and often is) commodified by institutions such as the tourism industry, mainstream media, and national government, the inclusion of difference by the vloggers I describe here is not necessarily neatly packaged or toned down, but is normalized and integrated into the flow of tours. Iman’s tour of Eid Guesthouse cultivates feelings of intimacy as she shows spaces of prayer, rest, and privacy, while also normalizing cultural difference. After leaving the dorm-style rooms, she enters the hallway where the bathroom is located. “Put your slippers on,” she says from behind the camera as she slips into the footwear just out of frame, “customary in Korea. And then you walk down and your bathrooms actually here.” Though it is a minor detail, she does not linger on her brief acknowledgment of wearing slippers inside bathrooms in Korea⁶⁵ and thus this “Korean” behavior is not distinguished from the “non-Korean” features of the guesthouse; the two cultural influences are unremarkably entwined.

⁶⁴ Even in the case of semi-private spaces like guesthouses, the meanings of these domestic spaces are still similarly shaped by their inclusion of beds, showers, toilets, etc.; these are spaces in which people - often including the vlogger herself - would expect some degree of privacy, so sharing them in great detail fosters intimate connections.

⁶⁵ Although Iman does not explain this further, slip ons are worn in many Korean bathrooms as showers are often not separate from sinks and toilets as they are (generally) in many places in Europe and North America.

The guesthouse itself is not only a material engagement with difference for both Koreans and tourists who are not Muslim, but the virtual tour of the space on YouTube evokes feelings of connectedness to the space and to its host. Iman being a Black Muslim Somali-American positions her as a new cosmopolitan subject who not only relies on gendered labor to connect with others and gain visibility on YouTube, but whose presence shifts assumptions about who can be cosmopolitan from Eurocentric notions of universal essentialism to rooted, feminist understandings of maintaining intersecting identities and multiple national/cultural affiliations. As one top commenter writes, “Masha allah I like the place and I am happy to see Iman unni again,” speaking to their emotional connection to Iman and highlighting multiplicity. The Arabic expression “MashaAllah” is said to express appreciation for a person or something that has happened; it “serves as a reminder that everything is achieved by the will of God.”⁶⁶ By using this particular phrase, the commenter signals their belonging to a particular in-group shared by Iman while implying that either the guesthouse’s existence in Korea and/or Iman’s return to YouTube is of divine intervention. The commenter also attaches the kinship term “unni” to Iman’s name, which is a term of endearment in Korea(n) also meaning “older sister.” These mixed cultural/linguistic sentiments exemplify a new understanding of cosmopolitan subjectivity that does not trade one national/cultural affiliation for another, or ostensibly transcendent entirely. By maintaining a cosmopolitan subjectivity that is rooted, embodied, and visceral, vloggers-as-hosts do not need to reject or obscure their foreignness. They can claim space in and knowledge of Korea, while also upholding their own national and/or cultural identities.

Rachel’s first tour of an apartment, published in 2016, starts with a shot of her shoe closet after a brief one-on-one introduction in which she notes that the tour itself will be “really short

⁶⁶ According to My Islam. For more details on this phrase and its significance, see: <https://myislam.org/meaning-of-mashallah-or-inshallah/>

and sweet.” She opens the sleek white closet doors at the entryway to reveal mostly empty shelves, bags and shoes neatly packed at the top of the closet which goes “all the way up to the ceiling.” She cuts to a shot of her kitchen just over her right shoulder, slowly panning right past the sink, pausing at the washing machine sitting neatly underneath a counter with a small burner. “No drying function,” she laughs softly from behind the camera, “besides like a tumble dry that doesn’t do anything.” The absence of a dryer is unheard of in the U.S., but Rachel glosses over this detail, moving on to a close-up of an electric water kettle atop the counter, that she notes “is awesome for instant coffee or tea.” There could be nothing more mundane than these details of her apartment, yet the video has more than 800,000 views, making it over four times more popular than her next most viewed video. Filming the everyday - as I will discuss at more length in Chapter Three - familiarizes the global space for the audience, and emphasizes Rachel’s knowledge over the domestic space.

As Rachel continues her tour, she opens her kitchen cabinet to show off a row of “all [her] little baking mixes [she] got from America,” a nod to her intact attachment to home and to those viewers who will immediately recognize the red Betty Crocker label, perhaps also feeling a childlike urge to taste cake from a box (see: Figure 10). The presence of these baking mixes evokes more than just a shared nostalgia; they communicate a particular version of White, middle-class femininity inherently tied to American domesticity. The Betty Crocker brand⁶⁷ “asserted that baking and cooking were closely associated with love” (Hisano, 2010, p. 223), meaning that American housewives’ physical and emotional labors were closely entwined. What’s more, integral to these housewives’ labors of love was their performance of hospitality. Akin to vloggers’ performances as hosts, White, middle-class women, as the dominant standard

⁶⁷ As we can see, making a woman into a brand is nothing new or exclusive to digital culture.

for American heteronormativity, were expected to not only care for their husbands, but to also host loved ones inside their homes, dedicating themselves to their guests' emotional well-being (Hisano, 2010). Rachel's casual nod to her collection of baking mixes can evoke a visceral reaction for those audience members who share distinct memories of taste, smell, and experience. Even for those for whom these particular products may be unfamiliar, they are shown the mundane reality of how Rachel maintains a material attachment to the U.S.



Figure 10: Rachel's baking mixes | "Seoul Apartment Tour! (\$625)" (June 30, 2016)

Panning left, Rachel shows off an alcove decorated with pale blue wallpaper. Two wooden stools sit at a small surface jutting out from the alcove, and as she films this space she notes: "I got these stools from GMarket, only 15,000 won." Her lack of further clarification implies that her audience shares a common understanding that 15,000 won is a good deal, but also that Korea is not extraordinary, just where she has made her second home. This unremarkable intermingling of familiarity and difference exemplifies the visceral cosmopolitanism which is tied to the domestic (Nava, 2007). The juxtaposition of

cultural/national references in Rachel's tour tether her to two national/cultural spaces simultaneously, rather than alluding to her total assimilation or emphasizing the exoticism of South Korea.

YouTube prioritizes dominant discourses and Western voices (Guo & Lee, 2013) and to some extent reflects a further expansion of empire, but the ways in which individual creators communicate their presence in Korea matters. Unlike *EatYourKimchi*'s content in which they distance themselves from the exoticized Other (Oh & Oh, 2017), the creators I describe here successfully perform their roles as hosts in a way that acknowledges and incorporates difference. By documenting their own lived experiences, they orient themselves toward a multiplicity of cultures and identities, and care for their viewers/subscribers via their openness and hospitality.

However, when considering the gendered dimensions of cosmopolitanism, we must also take seriously the racial dynamics which necessarily position these vloggers-as-hosts differently. Iman's Black Muslim womanhood communicates perhaps a more "radical" sense of belonging in Korea than does Rachel's normalized whiteness, and their visible identities carry different weights on YouTube. Bishop (2018) argues that YouTube's algorithm promotes and rewards content that reflects hegemonic assumptions about gender, which then influences creators to practice normative displays of femininity. YouTube prioritizes content that replicates or resonates with the mainstream (Berliner, 2014), meaning that creators are encouraged to align themselves with Western ideologies and dominant norms (Guo & Lee, 2013; Oh & Oh, 2017). Like Rachel, Iman must also appear relatable and approachable, successfully performing her femininity, but her racial identity further marginalizes her both on and offline. In reconceptualizing what it means to be a cosmopolitan subject, I want to also acknowledge the complexity of intersectionality; the intimate publics which form around creators are not

homogenous and individual viewers will feel differently connected to creators' content depending on their own lived experiences. A viewer may be drawn to a particular creator because they see themselves in her gender and racial identity (e.g., Sobande, 2017), but they may also form a connection with her based on her being a foreigner in Korea. This study does not speak to the specificity with which individual viewers are attracted to content and/or creators, however, it is important to consider how gendered cosmopolitanism is always meaningful, but that its meaning shifts along axes of race, nation, class, and culture.

This chapter has focused on tours of domestic space to understand the communicative and affective functions of vlogs produced by foreign women in South Korea. These videos are grounded in an audience-oriented ethics of care extended through feminist hospitality (Hamington, 2010) and their creators' cosmopolitan subjectivity does not transcend their own national, racial, or cultural identities, but instead "reflects a celebration of human difference" (Appiah, 1998) by holding the global and local simultaneously. Hospitality, as a form of free, emotional labor, has been historically "undervalued in modern free-market economies" (Hamington, 2010, p. 27), but emerges in tour vlogs as a mode of audience-oriented communication that fosters the formation of digital intimate publics. These intimate publics are distinctly transnational, as they emerge through affective connections to creators' experiences, emotions, and everyday objects, as well as newly formed/forming connections to space and place.

With limitations on travel - whether those be due to restraints on time and money, concerns over carbon emissions, or those that are state-sanctioned due to a global pandemic - we are largely dependent upon media images to inform our understanding of people, nations, and cultures outside ourselves (Morley & Robins, 1995). The rise of less regulated platforms like

YouTube has allowed for an explosion of media produced not by industries, but by individual producers/consumers who present alternative (and ostensibly more genuine) representations of reality. In the next chapter, I continue to discuss the ways in which YouTube videos can reframe foreigners' sense of belonging in Korea, while also emphasizing production tactics that do not necessarily subscribe to market logics. That is, whether intentional or not, when creators emphasize embodied behaviors, slow down to observe the routine and mundane, and make the everyday into a pleasurable aesthetic, they prioritize communication and connection with a global audience of viewers, rather than the strategic commodification of self and/or experience.

Chapter Three: Aestheticizing the Everyday: Affect, Embodiment, and the Presentation of Self in Day in the Life Vlogs

In this chapter, I dive headfirst into creators' performances of habitual behaviors and mundane routines. By focusing on the composition and interactive features of "day in the life" vlogs, I examine the aestheticization of the everyday as a mode of transnational communication and affective texture. Their depictions of the ordinariness of daily life not only normalizes their belonging in Korea, but also connects them to global audiences via the transmission of emotion and incorporation of the body. While day in the life vlogs are representative of one's lived - albeit edited - reality, they require that the individual vlogger performs for her audience a version of everyday life that is not only visually appealing, but narratively intriguing. A creator who makes daily vlogs must ensure that viewers not only subscribe to her channel, but also that they regularly engage with her content and feel somehow connected to and/or invested in her life. As such, vlogs rely largely upon *feeling* as a core component of communication. Unlike utilizing tactics such as attention-grabbing video titles, popular keywords to optimize searches, and tried-and-true conventions of vlogging like consistent upload schedules and high quality lighting and audio, feeling is not exactly a measurable component of vlogging. Creators must navigate not only how their daily vlogs reflect reality, but also how their lives can be shaped into something creative, engaging, and expressive. This is particularly important for transnational communication and community-building, as relating across different nations and cultures requires connection beyond shared identities and experiences.

Vloggers use video as a mode of both storytelling and, as Kim Larson (2015), the director of Google's BrandLab⁶⁸ has put it, "as a tool for storymaking, in which consumers get to take part." The notion of storymaking implies the processual nature of vlogs; they are only made meaningful insofar as viewers find themselves pulled toward them, watch them, and feel attached to and incorporated in the creator's ongoing life story. Fundamental to audiences becoming entwined in this narrative is the believability of the vlog, that creators are read as transparent and authentic. As described in Chapter One, being authentic and true to one's self is integral to creators' satisfaction with their work, while also being a well-known contemporary marketing strategy (Marwick, 2013). But, as noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, even more important is the *relationship* consumers have with the brand or product (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) has argued that U.S. brand building is reliant upon "building an affective, authentic *relationship* with a consumer, one based - just like a relationship between two people - on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (p. 8). To craft a successful personal brand, the creator must become an entrepreneur of the self, not only performing their authenticity, but being verifiably read as such by their audience.

Crafting a legible self-brand is a prerequisite for successfully working within the neoliberal culture of social media platforms, and doing so does not negate the emotional and relational values of content creation. Just as branding does not necessitate "selling out," media production is not and has never been solely about monetary gain, popularity, or transmitting information. Although YouTube videos can still technically be viewed as data that empowers platforms, the content of vlogs goes beyond that which is commodifiable; creating a vlog is

⁶⁸ Google's emphasis on *making* stories (a step beyond simply telling them) insinuates the empowerment of its users, despite having control of these stories insofar as they become data points, as I have touched on in Chapter One.

about feeling, crafting a narrative, connecting with others, and making the otherwise mundane into - perhaps - something beautiful, something worth not taking for granted. Part of my intervention in this chapter is to more fully incorporate aspects of creativity and emotion in production/consumption. While feminist scholars have addressed gendered and immaterial labor online (Arcy, 2016; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Gill & Kanai, 2018; Jarrett, 2014; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Scolere, Pruchniewska, & Duffy, 2018), they have largely glossed over the importance of creators' artistic self-expression as a way to connect bodies to other bodies. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed (2004b), I focus on the emotionality of texts and how feelings form and surface global collectives. While my analysis here is grounded in the texts themselves, it is also indicative of my ethnographic approaches to Internet research; my discussions of affect and embodiment throughout this chapter are informed by my own lived and relational experiences watching vlogs and my long-term investment in regularly viewing the lives of others.

In this chapter, I engage with the composition of and performances within day in the life vlogs, attending explicitly to the ways in which aesthetic and embodied processes of production add affective texture to videos and serve as a gendered mode of communication. Through the lens of performance studies, the way a creator presents herself and her world on screen is not an individualistic pursuit of following market trends and meeting consumer expectations. Rather, it is an artistic practice that tells stories, shapes identities, and constructs reality. In the sections that follow, I unpack the ways in which embodiment and everydayness work as an alternative conduit for affective relationships, not only between the creator and her audience, but between the audience and Korea. I begin by reading Whitney's vlog of an "average" day in her life. This video - as with other similar vlogs - complicates notions of who belongs in Korea, as Whitney

performs “normalcy” by embodying routine behaviors, and in turn, encourages her audience to view themselves as belonging as well. Next, I continue to discuss the body by considering the vloggers’ ubiquitous handheld “selfie” shots and their role in transnational connection. Moving from the presentation of self to the presentation of material objects, I finally examine the ways vloggers aestheticize everydayness, making otherwise inconsequential experiences pleasurable. Ultimately, for this specific subset of creators, the performative aspects of daily vlogging - that is, filming tactics (e.g., selfie shots), post-production (e.g., stylized editing), self-presentation (e.g., emphasizing the individual body), and choice of content (e.g., routinized behaviors) - produce gendered and racialized identities, which in turn shapes the narrative surrounding “foreigners” in Korea.

Identity and the Performance of Self

The sun shines through a window that sits just off left, out of frame, rays falling upon a “sleeping” figure wrapped in a fluffy pale blue blanket and hugging a duck stuffed animal. A playful melody sets the tone as Whitney, her hair pulled back by a white headband, suddenly opens her eyes and stares directly at the camera. She stretches her arms wide, rolling around while still grasping the toy duck, and finally sits up, yawning and smiling sleepily. After putting on large, dark-rimmed glasses, she leans slightly toward the camera and greets her viewers: “Good morning! It’s me, Whitney and...today is another day in the life of...me!” Immediately, viewers are welcomed into the banal of the everyday, watching an individual on screen start her day the way most of us do: bare-faced, sleepy, and not yet “ready” for the outside world. “I stayed up ‘til six o’clock in the morning, ‘cause I was watching Netflix,” she confesses, a relatable experience for those of us who have also opted into endless “Next Episode” cycles offered by the streaming platform. “I have so much to do today,” Whitney reaches out and grabs

her camera, now framing herself in a close up, “so, I thought in order to stay on track of what I have to do, maybe I’ll just do a day in the life.” The audience, already asked to relate to her habitual binge-watching, is now prompted to hold her accountable. This responsibility connects Whitney’s viewers more intimately to her life and confirms their role in her performance; that is, Whitney is in control of representing herself as relatable, but the audience determines whether or not she can be read as such.

In the transitional seconds before we meet her in her bathroom, Whitney films a downward angle of her kicking on her slides (“my shoe!”). This mobile first person shot combines vlogger and viewer perspectives; we are seeing what she sees and are prompted to imagine ourselves getting out of bed. In the next shot, we then quickly become the voyeur once again, watching from nearby as Whitney, her red and yellow Wonder Woman pajama shorts now in full view, hunches over a green porcelain sink to brush her teeth. These juxtaposed shots (selfie, first person, and third person) encourage the audience to identify with (and see themselves in) the creator, while the content of the video - that is, her “average” daily routine - is a performance of everyday life. After brushing her teeth, Whitney splashes her face with cold water and pulls out a beige bottle of facial cleanser. Cheery copyright-free music continues to play as she shows off the label to the camera and then proceeds to wash her face. Back in her bedroom, Whitney applies toner (explaining that she does not usually use it in the morning) (see: Figure 11) and moisturizer (fumbling over the name of the serum), and then holds up her boxes of contact lenses. This sequence is akin to that of any YouTube beauty guru or lifestyle vlogger who regularly uploads their detailed and transparent morning, evening, and/or daily routines. The application of makeup and skincare is not only viewed as caring for one’s appearance, but is a

gendered performance that provides a model for others to adopt similar ways of caring for their bodies.



Figure 11: Whitney applies toner as part of her morning routine | “Average Day in Korea for ME! :) (IRL vlog #2)” (October 6, 2017)

Day in the life vlogs always center the body of the creator,⁶⁹ but they are not simply narcissistic productions; vlogs tell stories and transmit emotion. On occasion, the feelings transmitted through vlogs are intense, like excitement at a concert or disbelief at a celebrity meet-and-greet, but more often they are mundane. The everyday feelings associated with a morning routine, a warm meal, a cozy cafe, or a productive work session are conveyed in much daily vlog content and as such, it is not difficult to relate and feel proximate to these worlds on screen. While it is impossible to represent a momentary feeling “accurately,” embodied modes of filming and speaking (e.g., handheld and mobile camera angles, direct address) create an

⁶⁹ That is, at least the majority of vlogs produced by creators from the US/UK/Australia/Canada. Abidin’s (2019) work on East Asian vloggers demonstrates how the body becomes much less of a focal point - and indeed, is simply an accessory to slow living - in their videos.

affective texture that pulls viewers toward the familiar-but-unfamiliar; as the top-rated comment on Whitney's IRL vlog observes: "I don't know how I got here, but I can't leave."⁷⁰ The performance - and subsequent recognition - of the relatability and everydayness is especially important for non-Korean creators in Korea.

While affect and emotion are salient features in most (if not all) daily vlogs, this niche genre of transnational content creation not only cultivates a relationship between creators and their viewers, but between viewers and Korea. Creators' performances of "realness" manifest through routinized behaviors and everyday life legitimize their presence in Korea, despite clearly being outsiders. Audiences who feel connected to these ostensible outsiders are in turn invited to feel connected to Korea as well. However, unlike the nation and culture portrayed in popular culture, day in the life vlogs construct Korea as more or less enjoyable, but nevertheless mundane.

The vlogger makes her day-to-day visually appealing and consumable. Additionally, the process and format of vlogging creates something tangible as both vloggers' and viewers' bodies are incorporated in the flows of production and consumption. That is, vloggers' technologies become an extension of their outstretched arms as they film themselves, and viewers do not just absorb the vlog from a distance, but they are made to feel something, to be invested enough to turn into the next episodic glimpse of daily life. As an extremely salient part of YouTube's present day cultural milieu, day in the life (or "lifestyle") vlogs are not necessarily finalized, neatly-packaged products as are episodes of reality television, but are interactive and processual methods of communication. In her extension of Raymond Williams' (1974) theorization of television, van Dijck (2013) argues that "snippets" are YouTube's distinct cultural form, or short,

⁷⁰ This comment has (at time of writing) 972 likes and 16 replies (most of which echo the sentiments with some variation of "same").

user-generated content meant to be shared, commented on, and reproduced. She argues that the most important aspect of snippets is their status as *resources*, as unfinished products (van Dijck, 2013). As a kind of snippet (albeit, no longer limited to ten minutes in length), vlogs are resources for social interaction, affective engagement, and, in the case of Whitney and others like her, transnational connection. For viewers who have not (or who may never) traveled to Korea themselves, foreign creators' daily vlogs are a visceral resource on which to draw for not just understanding, but experiencing Korea together. Layered atop the creator's subjective and artistic vision are the meanings made by viewers all over the world.

Day in the life vlogs do not separate the aesthetic and the social; videos like Whitney's "Average Day in Korea" collapse art and everyday life. She stitches together glimpses of herself, her home, and her habits in post-production, adding music that makes a common mundane morning routine into something worth watching all the way through. Vlogs' focus on everyday actions, artistic practice, and qualities of liveness⁷¹ make them inherently performative. Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner (2002) points to all of these factors as being key characteristics of performativity more generally, and goes on to note that performances "mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories" (p. 28). When creators document their own embodied behaviors and share them on YouTube, they tell a story about who they are and how they live their lives. For foreigners in Korea, their performance of ordinariness situates them within a social order, relating their bodies to others. In his theorization of the "culture of everyday life," John Fiske (1992) argues that the "mundane body" is a

⁷¹ As I illustrate throughout this chapter in particular, vlogs are defined by interactivity and evocation of feelings of "togetherness" through, for example, modes of filming and direct address. This, I argue, constitutes a sense of "liveness" even when the vlog is edited and published, and not *actually* consumed in real time. Additionally, upon sustained observation of Whitney's channel specifically, viewers generally stopped commenting on vlogs after a brief period of time; as soon as a new vlog is uploaded, the last becomes rather irrelevant as the vlogger's life narrative progresses.

“synecdochal embodiment of the social order” (p. 164). That is, by practicing habits that a society deems “normal” or banal, the individual demonstrates their ability to fit in, to subscribe to the dominant social order. So, although Whitney’s racial identity may differentiate her in South Korea more broadly, her successful navigation of a daily routine in her apartment situates her among so many others living and working in Seoul; there is nothing “extraordinary” about staying up late watching Netflix, doing laundry, or making a meal.

In her work on Asian American performativity and the everyday, Ju Yon Kim (2015) also examines embodied behaviors, pointing to the mundane as “a vehicle for testing borders of race, nation, and class” (pp. 37-38). If one can successfully adopt the habits of another nation/culture then, presumably, they are more likely to be accepted. J. Y. Kim’s (2015) exploration of the “racial mundane” helps illuminate the complexities of race as its meaning shifts across borders. Habits of a particular racialized group,⁷² J. Y. Kim observes, “came to emblemize what resisted change, and thus embodied racial essence” as mannerisms were assumed to be not only cultural, but inherently physical (p. 48). One’s ability to both perform assimilation by adhering to “normal” embodied behaviors *and* being recognized by others as doing so correctly can lead to a feeling that one is no longer an outsider -- or at least that their visible difference does not disrupt the status quo too much. For creators with such an expansive reach, the recognition by viewers of their legitimacy helps re-constitute who belongs in the country, as well as who has an authority to speak to what is normal.

⁷² It should be noted that Kim’s chapter discusses habits and mannerisms associated with - and thus seen as prime points of further discrimination - early Chinese migrants to the U.S. Thus, her case study here has a lot more at stake than the privileged class of foreign residents and/or visitors from the West existing in Korea, as Chinese migrants were not only seen as “outsiders,” but abhorrently oppressed and excluded. However, I maintain that Kim’s theories of racialized performance provide a useful approach to understanding transnationalism, as well as cross-racial and -cultural communication, as it applies to my work.

In the Afterward to her book, Kim (2015) discusses the ways in which popular Asian American YouTubers capture the attention (and loyalty) of audiences “by demonstrating that they are adept at articulating the nuances of quotidian activities and behaviors” (p. 250), namely, applying a “natural” makeup look, living in a college dormitory, or dating. Their performances in these videos, like those of Korea-based vloggers, are relatable to a wide audience and allow race and culture to exist as a kind of barely-relevant backdrop. It is not that race no longer matters; when one viewer gently advises Whitney as a “fellow black girl” to change her lighting set up to complement her complexion, it is clear that some viewers do find race meaningful and worth commenting on. But her ability to demonstrate her ordinariness while navigating fitting in both America and South Korea to some extent requires that she avoid making her content explicitly about race. When it comes to the transnational flows of lifestyle content online, it is crucial for vloggers to make and maintain connections with audiences via genuine and emotional engagement, expressed through their embodied performance, and that their belonging in multiple cultural, national, and/or racialized categories at once is not seen as strange.

After Whitney finishes her morning beauty routine and feeds her fish, a simple black screen serves as a transition to the next mundane activity: laundry. Each step of this process - tossing clothing into the machine, choosing a cycle, dumping in detergent - is given its own close up, providing a vague “how to” guide for others to reproduce the process if desired. By using the washing machine with only *hangul*⁷³ instructions without hesitation, Whitney performs her belonging in Korea. This simple behavior is a performance of multiplicity, reflecting Fiske’s (1992) acknowledgement that, at the intersections of race, gender, and/or class, individuals can develop “a degree of familiarity with more than one position in social space,” thus having

⁷³ The writing system of the Korean language

multiple “homes” or habitats (p. 164). It is not that she is attempting to assimilate to Korea to the extent that she eschews or even tones down her Black American identity, but that she is simply able to fit in in multiple social spaces at once. Whitney is an American who rents an apartment in Seoul - thus literally having a physical home there - and her showing the domestic chores to maintain that home, as well as categorizing this day in the life as “average” in the video’s title, reinforces for her audience that her living in Korea is not glamorous or exciting.

In her discussion of performances of self on Twitter, Papacharissi (2012) argues that this relationship between self and audience online requires that the performer adapt their behaviors accordingly. That is, the performance takes on new meaning depending on the imagined audience. After Whitney puts together her lunch - a light, green salad with creamy dressing and a side of apple and cinnamon spice tea - she sits down in front of the camera to chat while she eats. “Some people ask me how I stay in shape, and one way is just through my diet. I just try to eat really clean,” she says frankly, “I did have McDonald’s yesterday, though.” Not only is Whitney’s “average” performance gendered - having a skincare routine, doing laundry, and maintaining one’s figure and diet are stereotypically coded as feminine - but her audience is constructed as sharing her gendered identity. By acknowledging viewers’ interest in her ability to stay slim and physically fit and incorporating the answer (as well as visual proof of her eating habits) in her vlog, the audience is constructed to follow similar feminine scripts. Notably, in her study of Black women’s engagement with other Black women’s lifestyle content, digital media scholar Francesca Sobande (2017) points to identity and identification as crucial components of community-building. She argues that Black women’s vlogs provide for their viewers an “opportunity to engage in resistant and self-empowering activity when building an identity influenced by the online voices of other Black women” (p. 667). Seeing Whitney not only

represented on screen, but representing *herself* and creating her own autobiographical narrative, has the potential to say to Black women viewers all around the world that they can (and should) belong anywhere.

With 16K “likes” and over 600K views, Whitney’s “Average Day in Korea for ME!” appeals to a wide audience. But her self-presentation and depiction of her daily routines means more than just demonstrating her mainstream relatability; her Blackness matters as a YouTube representative for foreigners in Korea. Viewed from a U.S. perspective, Whitney’s⁷⁴ Blackness is understood in part through histories of enslavement and white supremacy. But the meaning of Black American identity does not simply translate across borders. According to sociologist Jae Kyun Kim (2015), Korea’s history of anti-Blackness stems from the Age of Empire and the rise of social Darwinism as a means to equate failure to modernize with racial inferiority. “As much as they strove to emulate the West,” Kim (2015) writes, “their image of racial others was crucial to how they understood the world,” and inventing images of an inferior racialized other “gave [Koreans] hope of independence from the Japanese Empire” (pp. 213-214). As Black vloggers continue to rely on depictions of their everyday lives in Korea, they rewrite their roles as ostensible outsiders.

While numerous feminist media scholars have identified the ways in which aspects of identity like race, gender, ability, and sexuality translate to digital/social media spaces, little has been said about the transnational aspects of embodiment online. Building on the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Bandana Purkayastha (2012) begins to address this blindspot, arguing that our

⁷⁴ And Iman’s and Kali’s, though all three Black women’s intersecting identities certainly carry different weight. Iman’s hijab and explicit identification with her Somalian identity mark her as distinctly “Other” in ways that differ from Whitney, while Kali’s mixed race Black/White identity shape her experience as well, both in the U.S. (tied to both narratives of colorism and histories of miscegenation) and Korea (as lighter skin may or may not provide degrees of privilege).

understanding of intersectionality often overlooks the ways in which racialized hierarchies operate outside of Europe and North America. As she writes of transnational spaces, both geographic and virtual, “There are variations of who is part of the privileged majority verses the marginalized minority within a country” and it is entirely possible for someone to experience a marginalized *and* privileged status simultaneously (Purkayastha, 2012, p. 59). While Whitney’s Black identity makes her vulnerable to overt racism in Korea, her status as an American citizen and native English speaker equips her with privilege. She is still marginalized as a woman of color when living at home in the U.S., but the social, cultural, and political meanings of her identity carries a different weight elsewhere. As I mention throughout this dissertation, the audience - imagined or otherwise - plays a significant role in shaping the meaning of online content, so when a viewer in Japan, Brazil, Nigeria, or Russia sits down to watch Whitney’s day in the life vlog, her identity will necessarily be filtered through a particular perspective.

For content creators, their performances of race, gender, nation, and culture are most clearly articulated (and normalized) through day in the life vlogs. As I have highlighted in my analysis of Whitney’s vlog, these videos appeal to audiences through authentic performances of the self and showcasing the mundane aspects of daily life. Not only is the mundane “the slice of the everyday carried - and carried out - by the body” (J. Y. Kim, 2015, p. 13), but to publicly perform routine tasks and to share personal habits naturalizes one’s belonging to a particular space. Creating a successful vlog implies that the individual has followed the norms of the platform to the extent that they are accepted as a legitimate vlogger and thus, as belonging within the global creator space of YouTube. Additionally, as a non-Korean vlogger demonstrates her ability to navigate the Korean rental market and obtain a good apartment (see Chapter Two), shares her knowledge of solo travel, does not categorize Korean shower heads or laundry

machines as particularly strange, and/or indulges in (and makes herself) Korean food, she shows her audience that she is not fully an outsider. While these creators explicitly mark themselves as “foreigners” and their home language and cultures are integral to their vlogs, their emphasis on the mundane “tests the borders” of identity (J. Y. Kim, 2015). Creators’ performances of habit and routine communicate and legitimize their belonging in multiple places at once, while their creation of an embodied aesthetic, discussed in the following section, pulls audiences closer to the “real” Korea.

Self(ie) Presentation and the Embodied Aesthetic

The presentation of self in day in the life vlogs is in large part characterized by “selfie” shots, a mode of filming the self in action that communicates mobile co-presence and transparent spontaneity. In doing so, it is not only how vloggers act that mediates audiences’ understanding of and relationship to Korea, but also how they film. By pulling out a handheld device to capture her (presumably) unscripted feelings in the moment, the vlogger mimics the experience many of us have had⁷⁵ using FaceTime or Snapchat. Not only does this selfie shot immediately pull the audience toward the vlogger emotionally, but it collapses time and space. As viewers, we are aware that the vlogger recorded this at some other time, somewhere else, but this distance is not relevant in the moment of viewing when it feels as though the vlogger is spontaneously speaking directly to us. Early vlogging also incorporated direct address, but was largely defined by “confessional”-style sit-down sessions filmed on webcams (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010). This mode of self-documentation is still common today, but vlogging has evolved to incorporate much more mobility as vloggers take their cameras, and therefore their viewers, with them

⁷⁵ Particularly in the era of COVID-19 when, for a period of time, nearly all of our interactions with others were through a screen, even if they lived down the block.

throughout the day (Snelson, 2015). While many YouTubers rely on their favorite DSLR cameras to ensure high quality content, others take advantage of the cameras built into their iPhones as a means of quick, easy, and arguably more relatable means of filming, resulting in the proliferation of the ubiquitous selfie shot.

In “flying to korea (a vlog),” Kali takes to her typical iPhone filming, which is made apparent by the initial vertical video. “Good afternoon, it’s one,” she says as she lays on her bed, glancing periodically at the front-facing camera, “and today I’m finally going back!” The casual positioning of her head on her pillow, and the quick hand-held shot from her phone echoes the way a friend might quickly film and share a message via Snapchat or Instagram Stories. Images and videos shared in this way via social networking platforms have an important social function in that they approach synchronicity by sharing one’s life in “real time,” and the point of view equalizes power relations between creator and viewer (Zappavigna, 2016). In the following shot, Kali holds her camera in an outstretched arm, filming an interaction between her and her grandmother as she hugs her goodbye. The viewer then becomes incorporated into the physical embrace as the shot continues and Kali, phone in hand, reaches around the other woman on screen, briefly glancing down and smiling into the lens over her grandmother’s shoulder. Her gaze acknowledges the “presence” of the viewer, and the handheld shot establishes an embodied connection - that is, both physical and emotional - that traverses geographic distance.

The selfie is not simply a mode of representation, but instead it should always be understood as an embodied performance and as a social practice (Gómez Cruz & Thornham, 2015; Frosh, 2015). The social functions of a selfie can collapse distance and constitute companionship (Frosh, 2015), which are particularly crucial within a transnational context. If the viewer feels as though they are not just the vlogger’s subscriber (implying a hierarchy), but her

companion, then they become somewhat inseparable, accompanying her on her travels as her other half. Kali's vlog continues and includes shots of herself killing time at the airport, pulling out a twenty dollar bill to pay for a fruit smoothie and meandering past bookshelves at Hudson News. When it is finally time for Kali to board her plane, music plays over an unsteady first person view of the main cabin, passengers seated and waiting as Kali walks down the aisle. In the middle of the video (5:27), there is a fade to a shot of Kali, dressed in a black hoodie, filming herself in the bathroom. Her cutely decorated iPhone fills nearly half the frame, and although she is facing a mirror, she looks down at the front-facing camera as she says "I got 17 hours left - no, 4 hours left!" over the noise of the plane (see: Figure 12). Upbeat music begins as a post-production addition and Kali dances in the mirror before heading back to her seat. This sequence explicitly reveals her iPhone, and the reflection of her filming herself reminds us of the necessary presence of technology.



Figure 12: Kali in the airplane bathroom | "flying to korea KR (a vlog)" (March 7, 2019)


Like Whitney reaching out to grab her camera, Kali's iPhone becomes an extension of her body and the shot reflects the selfie's capacity as a gesture that "inscribes one's own body into new forms of mediated, expressive sociability with distant others" (Frosh, 2015, p. 1622). For individuals whose YouTube videos are watched all over the world, selfie shots are a prime way to constitute relational closeness and attachment. As a gesture, cultural phenomenon, and social practice, selfies transmit "human feeling in the form of a relationship" (Senft & baym, 2015, p. 1589). This relationship is not solely between the selfie-taker and viewer, but also between the image and platform, the platform and its users, and the viewer and viewed (Senft & baym, 2015). This latter relationship is an especially important aspect of transnational content creation, as viewers are not only invited to form attachments to the creator, but to the place in which the creator films themselves. In this particular scene, the airplane is more than a mere background, but it is meaningfully material; the place in which the shot takes place is integral to the "selfie assemblage," what Aaron Hess (2015) has described as a "constellation" of complex relationships between bodies, technologies, material objects, space and place. Kali's selfie shot is, on the surface, about her, but it equally constitutes a tangible experience of space to which the audience can relate. Once Kali arrives at her destination, viewers are primed to form an affective relationship to Korea as a concrete location - ultimately, one that is similar to many other places - rather than one that is fictionalized and inaccessible.

Immediately following Kali's celebratory mirror dance, the shot switches to the iPhone's front-facing camera and we watch her looking at herself - as opposed to directing her gaze toward the lens - as she briskly brushes back her hair. While most selfie-focused research describes still images, here I extend the notion of the selfie to also incorporate the mobile, unstable, "spontaneous" and self-facing mode of filming frequently used in vlogs. Like its

immobile sibling, the video selfie requires the viewer of the moving image to think about the process of filming, but it also involves the body in a way that the still image does not. Kali has the ability to pull out her iPhone at any moment, in this case choosing to film herself in the midst of an overseas flight. This sequence reflects some primary characteristics of the video selfie in particular, namely the emphasis on portable technology and the incorporation and documentation of the bodily act of filming (Krautkrämer & Thiele, 2018). Still in the airplane bathroom, she winces in discomfort, expressing that she is “so tired,” and now glancing back and forth between her own image appearing on her iPhone and the audience-oriented lens. While Kali clearly planned to film parts of her journey to Korea and it is impossible to determine which scenes were pre-scripted, this bathroom break at least appears to be spontaneous and, like her Snapchat-esque shot in bed, it constitutes intimacy with her audience. In an act of relatability, she does not attempt to hide her device, a handheld technology that many individuals also possess, and she captures her physical state mid-flight, revealing her imperfection.

Whether created on a camera phone, a point-and-shoot camera, or a portable DSLR, filmed images of the self are a concrete way of sharing experience; they constitute an intimacy between participants by way of seeing together, or what journalism scholar Mikko Villi (2015) has called the “synchronous gaze.” Although his use of this term refers to users’ ability to capture and share images immediately using their phones (Villi, 2015), the synchronous gaze works similarly in vlogs. It is no secret that Kali is editing and uploading this video at a later date, as the last few minutes of the video show her riding in a taxi and filming herself in her bedroom at her homestay, but the experience of viewing is still communicative, social, and material. Footage that Kali filmed of herself in the moment may not enable a truly synchronous viewing experience, but it does allow her audience a “glimpse of reality at-a-distance” (Lillie,

2011, p. 10), the distance in this case is just both in space and in time.⁷⁶ As an embodied form of interpersonal communication, handheld filming helps to further mitigate the distance between members of a transnational community of creators/viewers who are not only geographically dispersed, but also in different time zones and watching newly posted YouTube videos at different times.⁷⁷

Selfie shots communicate an embodied aesthetic that reminds viewers of the technology being used and that both represents creators' bodies and generates them (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2012). As a performative practice, selfies constitute identities (Gómez Cruz & Thornham, 2015). For creators like Kali, the embodied aesthetic shapes her viewers' perception of her: she is an aspirational, yet ordinary, figure. In making her process of traveling to Korea appear seamless, viewers are able to envision themselves being there with her (as one commenter expresses: "I'm so excited to experience this with you!!"), and to feel connected to her emotionally ("Your actually such a nice person in general and you've really inspired me to move to Korea, ily "). But selfies do not only constitute identities, they also underscore the relationship between materiality and digitality (Hess, 2015); the presence of the technological device accentuates one's embodied behaviors and the body's relationship to the environment creates a more tangible sense of space and place.

After a few seconds of a taxi cab ride, Kali appears, filming herself dancing in another mirror, this time standing in her new bedroom at her homestay. This shot of her evening arrival

⁷⁶ It should be noted that content creators are also able to mediate the temporal distance, establishing more feelings of synchronous connection with their audiences, by other, less time consuming communicative acts such as posting/re-posting Instagram Stories and replying to comments. The "always on" culture of the Internet requires creators to do their best to be consistent and maintain those relationships, even when they are partially imagined.

⁷⁷ That said, those who have subscribed to Kali, and thus are committing themselves to at least some allegiance to being her official follower/fan, will see the video automatically recommended to them and thus, will likely watch it within a reasonable window after its publication. After their initial posting, vlogs become somewhat irrelevant, which is another indication of the salience of the synchronous gaze and mediated presence for vlog viewers.

transitions to the next morning with a shift in music and a fade to black. Filming a video selfie yet again, Kali says to her audience, “Good morning from Seoul! Finally, I made it.” She plops down backward onto the rose-patterned bedspread, still filming herself in a way that orients her toward her audience. The audience is back where they started: in bed with Kali, whose selfie shot once again feels casual and candid. This is not only the way any vlogger is expected to act, picking up her camera and speaking extemporaneously - although certainly, selfie shots are commonplace for most vloggers from Western countries⁷⁸ - but her repetition of glimpses into private spaces and sharing personal feelings constitutes a gendered identity. Women are scripted to be softer, approachable, and to successfully navigate intimate relationships through their “natural” communicative behaviors, and Kali follows these scripts. In doing so, her documented journey back to Seoul then proves her worth as not simply a model for hopeful solo travelers, but for women. Additionally, her visible presence as a mixed-race Black American adds a further dimension of identity and lived experience. She continues to ground her days in the life in the use of frequent selfie shots that say “not only ‘see this, here, now,’ but also ‘see me showing you me’” (Frosh, 2015, p. 1610). This filming technique, defined by embodiment and social (albeit mediated) presence, allows Kali to assert her belonging to the space, both that of YouTube and of Korea. By default, these spaces privilege Whiteness and maleness, so selfie shots become more than just a gestural image or sociable interaction (Frosh, 2015); they challenge norms surrounding who is normalized as creating and centering themselves in everyday narratives.

Because filming oneself incorporates the body, it is intrinsically affective. That is, the camera becomes an extension of one’s physical self, creating an aesthetic that is not simply

⁷⁸ Crystal Abidin (2019) demonstrates how some vloggers in East Asia still produce videos that showcase their everyday living and routinized behaviors, but whose bodies serve more of a functional, background purpose (e.g., pouring tea, cooking, etc.). In Abidin’s (2019) example, the vlogger’s identity is not as central to the communicative event as in the vlogs I analyze here.

creative or self-expressive, but that is embodied and visceral. In another of Kali's videos, "a day in my life in korea" (2019), she returns to her bedroom after class to show off a new pink bag she's just received in the mail. Scooping the bag onto her shoulder, she stands and models her now complete look for the camera, walking briskly in place as though giving the audience a feel for what it will look like in motion. Picking up individual items off screen - Chapstick, gum, a small compact umbrella - she remarks that "we need" each item as she places them into her bag, and is at last ready to leave. The shots on her way to meet her friend (another YouTuber, Neisha) are all first person, and viewers see what Kali sees. From downward shots of her feet on the sidewalk to bustling subways, the material reality of the mundane once again emerges as viewers are encouraged to vicariously experience Seoul's everyday aesthetic. Out on the street, Korea comes back into the foreground and the commonplace becomes a point of viewing pleasure. While the performance of identity is a crucial point of the composition of day in the life vlogs, a focus on this alone risks obscuring the salience of Korea/n culture, the context within which this cosmopolitan subject emerges. In the next section, I move toward discussing embodiment in relation to pleasurable consumption, emphasizing the content, the senses, slow living (Abidin, 2019), and self-care in these vlogs which both communicate their protagonists' lived realities while also working to evoke collective feelings in audiences.

Pleasurable Consumption: Crafting the Allure of the Everyday

Just as integral to day in the life vlogs as the presentation of self is the representation of everyday objects and surroundings, and the stylized production choices that aestheticize the ordinary. Opening with a shot of herself seated in front of a mirror, surrounded by colorful decor, Cari's "lil self care vlog" weaves together the ordinary with a relatively rare event: getting a haircut and a "korean perm." After a brief on-screen text note for viewers to "skip to 3:36 for

hair content,” the scene shifts to a selfie shot of Cari earlier in the day, standing next to a window in her apartment and greeting her audience. “Hello everyone, it is a very important day to be alive! I finally went to the pupuseria, and...I’m gonna try them,” she says smiling toward the iPhone camera lens and holding up a large white plastic bag. A newly stable camera captures Cari, now seated cross-legged, ready to dig into her meal. She pulls out a clear plastic container as she narrates: “Let’s check her out...oh god no, I should be filming this, this is like food porn.” The angle suddenly shifts to aim downward as she unwraps the pupusa from aluminum foil, the dough visibly soft and slightly grilled, with cheese oozing from all sides. This sequence of preliminary indulgence turns something that could very easily be kept behind the scenes into an event to be shared with her audience. While Cari could have simply taken a bite of her El Salvadorian dish after setting up her iPhone to stabilize a particular frame, she instead incorporates her viewers into her own candid delight at unveiling the cheesy goodness, taking the time to establish a new focal point: not herself, but her food. In this moment, viewers can partake in pleasurable consumption; it is not that the food itself is extraordinary,⁷⁹ but the way in which it is presented that aestheticizes the experience and connects it to the body. And as the audience becomes affectively entwined in others’ everyday experiences by watching vlogs, their relationship to Korea becomes more tangible.

Cari’s impulse to include a “food porn” shot is driven by her own reaction, an affective response of not simply hunger, but desire. As she provides a momentary glimpse to her viewers as well, this desire is transmitted through a cinematic medium and aestheticized for viewers’ (co-)consumption (even if it is consumption only through looking). Through making the

⁷⁹ I recognize that finding a pupuseria in South Korea may be somewhat uncommon, but as Seoul is a “global” city *and* because Cari does not imply that finding the restaurant was at all strange or difficult, the object itself lacks any intrinsic “extraordinariness.”

everyday visually stimulating, viewers are enveloped in a process of “de-distanciation” which Mike Featherstone (2007) claims “points to the immediacy of the object, the immersion into the experience through the investment of desire” (p. 70). The consumption of food is perhaps one of the most commonplace daily experiences. By taking the time and care to not only film one’s takeout, cup of coffee, or homemade meal, but to make it appealing for an audience, content creators slow down to emphasize the pleasure of food. Cari’s first few bites of the pupusa satisfy her physical hunger while, as with popular *meokbang*⁸⁰ videos, the “intimate, everyday viscosity of eating...facilitates...subjective closeness and community” (Donnar, 2017, p. 125). In his study of *meokbang* and celebrity, media scholar Glen Donner (2017) argues that the intimate act of eating on camera facilitates the creation of active fan cultures who find companionship in eating “with” the individuals on screen. In the previous sections, I have established the ways in which viewers are constructed as “companions” to vloggers, not simply passive audiences, but active participants in meaning- and story-making. As such, it does not matter that viewers are not *actually* eating the pupusa Cari eats in her vlog, and they likely have had some prior encounters with gooey cheese or warm flatbread upon which they can draw sensory memories. Eating is not only “something that happens in encounters with the materiality of mouths and stomachs; rather, it takes place in, and assembles together, brains, eyes and computer screens” (Lavis, 2017, p. 201).

The visceral qualities of scenes of food and eating helps constitute the affective and everyday aesthetic of day in the life vlogs which connects individuals across differences in identity and geography. While the “everyday” will look different for every individual, philosopher Yuriko Saito (2017) defines everyday aesthetics by the “mode of experience based

⁸⁰ Korean portmanteau of “eating” and “broadcast”

upon an attitude we take” toward objects and activities within our routine (p. 10). That is, everyday aesthetics are about mindful attention to the details of ordinary or habitual behaviors, as well as a focus on moments of pleasurable experience (Saito, 2017). In order for a transnational community to be created through and sustained by the production/consumption of user-generated online content, creators must find ways to appeal to the senses, to connect bodies to other bodies, and to generate, drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed (2004b), “collective feelings.” And this is precisely what these day in the life vlogs do.

Ahmed (2004b) challenges the notion that emotions are a private matter, pointing to the ways in which emotions “surface” bodies, connect them to others, and secure collectives. For individuals who put their lives on the Internet, their emotions and those they may evoke in others are anything but private, instead cultivating connection through shared and familiar sentiments. In the following scene of her self-care vlog, Cari leans over her bathroom sink and applies a green clay mask⁸¹ to her face. After a jump cut, Cari appears seated in her dimly lit living room and playfully snaps her (now green) face toward the camera, saying “okay, so, let’s talk about the show that I am about to watch.” The show in question is “Dark,” a German psychological science fiction thriller series on Netflix that she says many of her viewers have been chatting with her about on Instagram. As though the audience was going to watch with her, she directly addresses them again before opening her laptop to start the series and cheerily says, “let’s go..be in pain!” As with eating something warm and indulgent, the feelings associated with applying a face mask and watching a frightening film or television show are also widely accessible and importantly, not specifically related to her being in Korea. Rather, they are moments in which

⁸¹ She links to this mask - among the other things she mentions throughout her video - in the description box. It is listed as “Matcha Mask” with a parenthetical notation that “they ALWAYS have 50% off sales.” This functions as a way for her audience to not only watch her use this product, but to be like her and use it themselves, encouraging them to participate in a positive (and feminized) act of pampering.

she slows down to enjoy consuming things that could be experienced anywhere in the world; interestingly, less than five minutes into the video, her objects of self-care are associated with Central (pupsa) and North America (Netflix), East Asia (matcha), and Europe (series). And as with her everyday depictions of living in Korea, none of these products are praised *because of* their difference, rather, simply integrated into her ordinary existence.

Resisting the commodification of difference may seem like a low bar, yet scholars have discussed the ways in which many travel-focused creators have relied on exoticization. Sociologist Jennie Germann Molz (2007) points to the ways in which travel bloggers whose content revolves around food practice “culinary tourism” as a way to confirm their own symbolic cosmopolitanism. These bloggers, who tend to be White, middle-class, and from Western countries, consume Otherness by eating (and constantly documenting for others) “exotic” foods, which allows them to claim worldliness while nevertheless “reassert[ing] the normality of the tourist’s own culture” (Germann Molz, 2007, p. 86). Relatedly, some individuals have created an entire brand⁸² reliant upon the repeated exoticization of and distancing from Korea/n culture (Oh & Oh, 2017). However, rather than “eating the Other” (hooks, 1992), the aestheticization of the everyday reframes consumption as pleasurable not because it relies on the consumption of difference as something to regard as strange, but because it reframes difference as familiar and ordinary. Of course, Cari’s identity is undoubtedly marked by privilege.⁸³ Her feeling at home in Korea is in part due to the ease with which she moves through a country that has typically

⁸² As discussed in previous chapters, this is in reference to Simon and Martina (*EatYourKimchi*), among others. Their acts of exoticizing Korea were the case at least until they moved to Japan in early 2016. One could make similar arguments (regarding exoticization) about their Japan content, though their foci and characterizations of Asia/n cultures have changed since their early days as YouTubers. One might also suggest that their reliance on tropes of exoticization allowed them to get extremely popular and only now have they been able to produce more “sophisticated” content, a speculation that is certainly worth unpacking elsewhere.

⁸³ And a privilege she is very forthright about as well; During June 2020, her Instagram Stories in particular were a place on which she not only engaged in numerous donations and re-posts of BIPOC creators in support of Black Lives Matter, but also she directly confronted hostile anti-BLM rhetoric in her comments/DMs.

viewed White immigrants from the West as more desirable than any other racialized group (Han, 2007; Oh & Oh, 2017). Yet, although being a foreigner in Korea is still somewhat novel (and therefore, worth watching), creators like Cari⁸⁴ largely do not rely on commodifying Korea/n culture to generate capital for themselves. Their being in this specific country is important - and helpful, for others who have an interest in going there - but their day in the life vlogs actively work against consuming the Other for the sake of views. It is not as though being in Seoul is the *same* as being in San Diego (Cari's hometown), but it is that living with difference is not something that needs to be overemphasized.

By making everyday experiences aesthetic, creators shape their content in a way that captures fleeting bodily experiences and small moments that allow the audience to slow down and look at something - a cup of tea, a shoreline, a bus ride, a cloudy sky - differently, and to enjoy doing so. "Aesthetics" is most commonly associated with the art world, however, the concept can be extended in ways that are not only more inclusive,⁸⁵ but that also more carefully incorporates fleeting bodily experiences. Saito's (2001) work provides a useful (and de-Westernizing) foundation for understanding everyday aesthetics, particularly with her emphasis on the body and impermanence. Physical art, such as sculpture or paintings, stays relatively permanent, as it is maintained to preserve its original condition. This "obsession with permanence," Saito (2001) suspects, "stems from the dominant Western metaphysical legacy...which privileges permanence, stability, and being as salient characteristics of reality, over change, transience, impermanence, and becoming" (p. 91). Alternatively, drawing our

⁸⁴ i.e., individuals who create content about their lives as foreigners in Korea

⁸⁵ This inclusivity not only reflects expanding what "counts" as aesthetic and/or aestheticize-able, but also who has access to this notion. That is, Saito (2001) argues that art - particularly Western art - and *understanding* and/or *appreciating* art is necessarily reserved for individuals who have studied it (e.g., the "ordinary" individual may not fully grasp the complexity of what makes something "good" or "bad" art).

attention toward this notion of “becoming” - rather than being - allows us to attend to the ways in which fleeting moments, activities, objects, and experiences can be appreciated for their aesthetic *and* their utilitarian value (Saito, 2001).

In another of Cari’s videos, “a messy but beautiful day in my life in seoul, korea VLOG,” was published two months after her self-care vlog and aptly captures the mindful attention to pleasurable and ephemeral experiences. The video opens with a classic selfie shot of Cari standing outside COEX mall, previewing for her audience what she’s planning for the day. However, as soon as she notes that she “didn’t look at the sky before I left my house,” rain apparently begins to fall from a dark gray sky. Just seconds later, the scene cuts to a shot of an empty plaza, sheets of rain pouring onto the pavement, the words “it’s hard being right all the time” appearing across the center of the screen. This sequence not only communicates that the actual content of Cari’s day in the life vlogs is authentic and unplanned, but also reflects Saito’s (2017) sentiment that “everyday aesthetics should embrace [life’s] complexities with all the messiness created by them” (p. 8). The downpour is not depicted as something to be discouraged about, but rather, a pivot point at which to restructure one’s behaviors. After some shots eating and shopping inside the mall, Cari appears on screen again to announce that she just ran into some of her viewers from Lithuania, and that despite the rain, she is now in “such a great mood.” Cari has created for/with her audience a way to not only see the disruptions of daily life and little glimpses of reality as beautiful, but also a way to *feel* it as such.

Later in the day, when the sky is clear and Cari has spent some time at home, she heads out again. During a classic out-the-window shot from her bus seat, an image overlay appears on the left side of the frame: a screenshot of Spotify playing “Can’t Stand Me Now” by The

Libertines.⁸⁶ This upbeat song, which she insinuates is playing at that moment on her iPhone, also plays in the video, creating a positive ambiance that propels us forward. Once Cari arrives at her destination, she stitches together mobile close ups of the tops of brick buildings, fruit stands filled with peaches, and deserted alleyways. She finally arrives at a cafe in which the sun peeks through the window panes, giving a faint glow to the vintage decor (see: Figure 13). Again, she provides close ups of tiny details: old mobile phones lined up on a shelf, typewriter keys with *hangul* letters, and her own sketchbook in which she is drawing an image of the cafe's interior with a ballpoint pen. The indie and alt-rock soundtrack complements the composition of shots to constitute not simply a clichéd reminder to enjoy the little things, but also a sense of peace acquired through the leisurely consumption of culture, knowledge, and experience, rather than products.

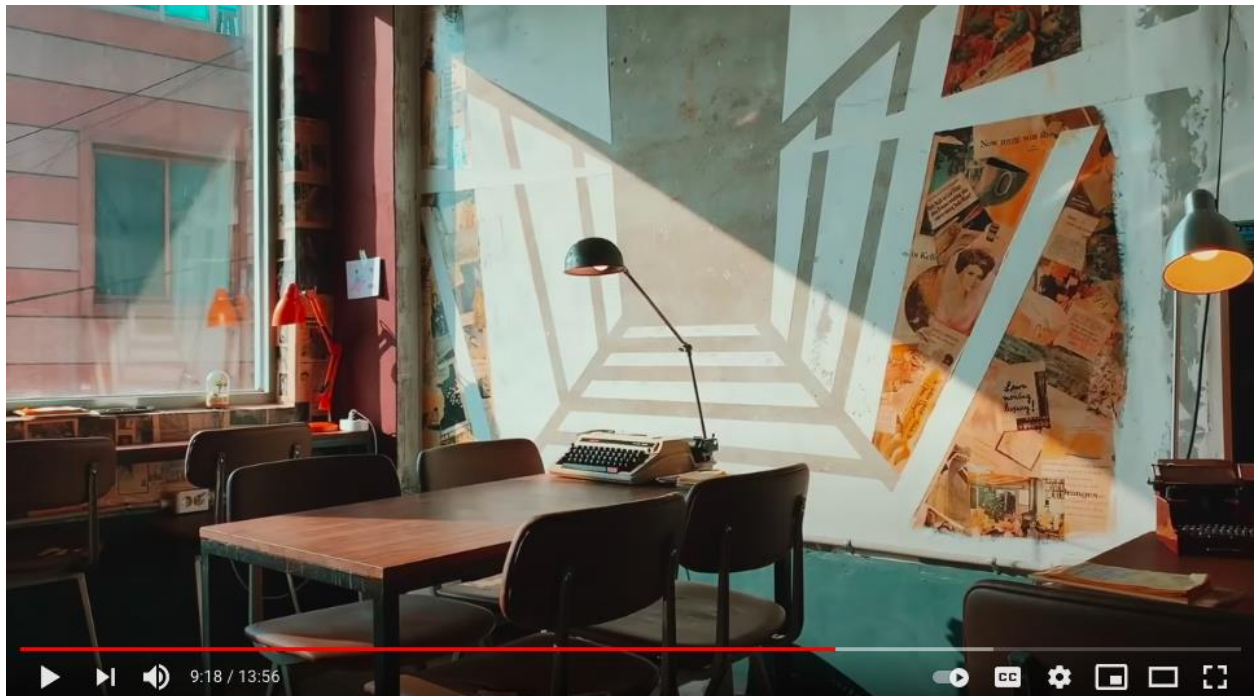


Figure 13: Vintage cafe ambiance | “a messy but beautiful day in my life in seoul, korea VLOG” (September 7, 2019)

⁸⁶ It is all too befitting that this would be the group/song she chooses to highlight here; the band’s namesake, “libertine,” reflects a philosophical orientation toward pleasure seeking and physical, sensual experiences as integral to one’s well-being.

Building on Elizabeth Currid-Halkett's (2017) theory of the "aspirational class," Abidin (2019) discusses how "home cafe" YouTube creators highlight "the sentimental value of functional objects" explaining their meaning through "its visual aesthetic or the associated memories of previous pleasant experiences" (p. 127). Although the "aspirational" creators Abidin (2019) describes often obscure their own class privilege in their pursuit of "slow living," they promote the reduction of conspicuous consumption via their own mindfulness and simplicity in lieu of convenience and luxury. Whether Cari creates a vlog about "self care" or the beauty of life's messiness, she too resists the contemporary culture of conspicuous consumption, instead emphasizing pleasurable consumption vis-à-vis an engagement with embodied behaviors and sensory experiences. In doing so, her day in the life vlogs leave an impression on others who leave traces of their feelings in the comments: "I really love how you made the vlog funnier," "I feel bad for laughing when you got splashed, but the song selection had me snorting!", "wow that sky was beautiful, im looking at it through a screen and im in awe," "you know what i felt it." It is through these impressions that "distance is transformed into proximity" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 34) and as such, the emotions tied to the everyday aesthetic strengthen this transnational community.

Aestheticizing the everyday does not necessarily render things extraordinary, but renders them visible (Saito, 2017). With their stylized glimpses into routine behaviors, day in the life vlogs provide a way for audiences to relate to life in Korea through an attachment that is cultivated via creators' capturing and creating moments of pleasure. In this ongoing process of world-making, feelings do not simply belong to the creator herself, but to the collective. The creators whose work I discuss in this chapter generate for/with their audiences visions of Korea that are inherently mundane, routine, and that normalize - but do not overemphasize - difference

and their own belonging in this particular space. This ordinariness is not something to be taken for granted or dismissed, but to be mindfully consumed; an unanticipated shot of rain becomes a peaceful reflective reminder to prioritize the embodied experience. It is not that someone's life becomes better or more valuable simply because they are living in another country and culture, but instead, our lives are all constantly in flux. In the final section, I briefly reflect on the consequences of everyday aesthetics in relation to the meaning made through day in the life vlogs. I then link depictions of ordinariness to my interviews in which creators address their intentions to be perceived as living normal lives and transition to Chapter Four, which provides a final look at how content creation can be a way to process emotions, connect with others, and perhaps most importantly, control the narrative.

Affect and the Process of World-Making

I do not want to lose sight of the fact that these women who document and publicize their lives in Korea are from Western countries (i.e., the U.S. and Europe). By normalizing their belonging in this particular national/cultural space, non-Korean individuals cannot avoid carrying with them histories of colonialism. Their embeddedness in these histories is addressed in the Conclusion, however, the argument that this content only works to once again reinforce the presumed dominance of the West is a simplified understanding of how this content is meaningful for creators and their audiences. Day in the life vlogs do not only augment an individualized relationship between vlogger and viewer; if they did, one might argue that viewers only receive, and thus subscribe to, a filtered version of Korea that is exaggerated and/or exoticized. Rather, in these vlogs, Korea is not presented as a commodity to be consumed. As I have demonstrated, the affective texture of day in the life vlogs helps to cultivate a relationship between audiences and Korea as a material space and place.

It is often easier to associate affect with spectacle, tragedy, or some other reactionary or intuitive gut-tugging force. But to do so obscures the ways in which the everyday serves as an alternative conduit for the cultivation of affective relationships. A mindful focus on the familiar allows one to pay attention to the sensations in the body and to experience and appreciate the ordinary (Saito, 2017). The vlogs I have described in this chapter⁸⁷ do just that by layering filming tactics, music, image and text overlays, and performances atop an otherwise mundane depiction of everyday routines. These creators produce videos that not only document their lives, but that create a resource for audiences to negotiate their own relationship with South Korea.

In her discussion of the “consequences” of everyday aesthetics, Saito (2017) argues that “we generally regard ourselves as recipients, dwellers, and consumers of the world fashioned by professionals. However...despite our lack of awareness, we all contribute to this world-making enterprise, and aesthetics play a surprisingly important, indeed crucial, role” (p. 141). Produced by ordinary individuals, day in the life vlogs present mindful glimpses of reality that leave impressions on others and in doing so, absorb the bodies of both producers and consumers in processes of world-making. The social and emotional function of aesthetics - that is, creating communities and collective feelings - also help move us away from the subject-object dichotomy which pervades Western thought. Vlogs’ reliance on the incorporation of the body, whether through filming tactics or the invocation of sensory experience, rejects any notion of the “disembodied, disinterested spectator” who Saito (2017) says is imagined as “the ideal agent for having an aesthetic experience” (p. 211). As the viewer becomes attached to both the creator and Korea via everyday aesthetics, they move away from rational deliberation as a means of

⁸⁷ As well as the numerous others in my data set that equally fit the criteria of day in the life vlogs.

measuring the “quality” of a vlog or the extent to which this is the “real” Korea.⁸⁸ Instead, this content constitutes a transnational community, a global collective that is built through the sensuous and the emotive. Significantly, everyday aesthetics requires thoughtfulness as a moral imperative; one must *care*, not just for themselves, but for design and for others’ feelings (Saito, 2017).

That said, we must not lose sight of the ways in which issues of difference emerge in vlogs that so explicitly engage with racial, national, and cultural identity. It matters that these creators are “foreigners,” as their being lumped into this singular homogenous category indicates that, regardless of their ability to speak Korean, to perform habitual and mundane behaviors, and to be read by their audience as fitting in, they are still technically categorized as outsiders, despite any surface- and state-level claims that celebrate multiculturalism. And while White creators may experience the de-legitimizing of their romantic partnerships with Korean men⁸⁹ or difficulties with finding work outside of teaching English, Black creators are continuously faced with the covert⁹⁰ remnants of rampant and oppressive anti-Blackness. Emotion and embodiment facilitate transnational communication, making it easier for individuals to connect (and to stay connected), but transnationality complicates understandings of race. Race, and its intersections with class, gender, and nationality, means differently as we cross borders and, as feminist scholars such as Purkayastha (2012) and Ina Kerner (2017) have pointed out, intersectional

⁸⁸ Of course, the notion of one “true” version of Korea is in and of itself essentializing and often implicitly exoticizing. As my interviews with creators revealed, they at times found that their viewers would ask them to “spill the tea” (so to speak) and provide juicy gossip about the “real” Korea, what they imagined creators were hiding in order to either construct Korea as either better or worse.

⁸⁹ In one of Cari’s more recent videos, she addressed a popular question from her viewers about her thoughts on the “AMWF” (Asian Male, White Female) tag used by other creators to promote and categorize their content. Essentially, Cari noted that she and Kurt could understand to some extent why people would choose to claim the label for themselves, but that they personally just saw themselves as a “normal” couple, not a racialized (and fetishized, as the tag is also associated with pornography) one.

⁹⁰ And sometimes, not so covert, as other Black individuals on YouTube still tell their stories about their experiences with blatant racism in Korea.

scholarship has tended to overlook global perspectives on identity. To address some of the complexities of identity and transnationalism, in the next chapter I turn back toward interviews with nine Western women who have expressed themselves through their own content creation about their lives in South Korea, many of whom articulated the pressing sense of “foreignness” they experienced, while simultaneously emphasizing the ordinariness of Korea.

Chapter Four: “Organizing the Chaos”: Navigating Competing Narratives of Gender and Nation through Social Media

Feeling at home online, like feeling at home in another country, is always affected by the perception of others. That is, while we can decide who we are, how we present ourselves, and where we feel like we belong, there are always aspects of our identities that are ascribed by others. This chapter focuses on the ways in which women negotiate their identities while crafting their social media presence, and how their online/offline experiences as foreigners contextualize their content creation. Relying on my data from interviews with nine non-Korean creators posting about their time spent in South Korea, I examine how these women combat competing narratives that shape their everyday existence, arguing that content creation is a way for them to reclaim agency and control. My return to interview data grounds my research in what happens “behind the scenes” for creators who rarely share the full picture of their lives abroad, despite their desires to be transparent and honest. Analyzing texts allows us to understand the communicative functions of self-representation, but interviews provide insight into the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that always *inform* creators’ content, but that are often obscured online.

In this opening section, I reflect on my own study abroad blog as a way to situate myself amongst the data; as a feminist researcher, this positioning demonstrates the ways in which my experiences often mirror that of my interviewees. With my own intentions for public documentation of my time in Korea in mind, I consider how my interviewees described their initial motivations for content creation, and how that shifted as their work gained traction. They were not just individuals speaking to family and friends, but they were now categorized into the nebulous Internet genre of “foreigners in Korea.” As they grappled with their intersecting identities (as non-Korean outsiders, as women from Western countries, as publicly accessible creators), others’ judgments about their roles and responsibilities infringe on their sense of self.

The sections that follow each present a narrative of the “foreign” woman in South Korea against which these creators must compete: those constructed by audiences, mainstream media, the nation-state, and other foreigners. These stories told by others can stifle the agency women feel they have, but at the same time, the processes of online content creation have empowering potentials. My interviewees were burdened by narratives of gender, nation, and belonging that did not correspond with how they saw themselves, but also articulated how their social media use had significant benefits. The chapter ends by examining these benefits and arguing for the transformative potentials of content creation for foreigners in South Korea.

As with the women I spoke with in my research, I grappled with the extent to which I wanted to share my “new” life on social media when I was studying in Seoul in 2012 and 2013. While I posted the obligatory photo dump on my Facebook (exclusively accessible to family and friends), I also returned to the Wordpress blog I started writing when I first set foot in Korea in 2012. As it neared mid-December, my time at Ewha Womans University was coming to a close, and I felt the desire to reflect (for whoever was reading my blog). My final blog entry began:

I feel like it’s been years since I’ve been back at home, even though it’s only been four months, and I’m finally going home in less than a week. Round two in Korea has been so much different from my time at Yonsei; I’ve learned what it’s like to live more of a normal life here, rather than constantly running around, chasing celebrities and making sure to visit all the tourist attractions. I just feel like a regular student, a regular (albeit temporary, and Korea never lets me forget that I am – and will always be – just a foreigner) citizen of Seoul.⁹¹

This feeling of normalcy while always being reminded that “I am - and will always be - just a foreigner” resonates with sentiments expressed by the women I interviewed for this dissertation nearly six years later. In our conversations, these women discussed a desire to be honest and transparent with all their readers/viewers, but they also acknowledged the difficulties of deciding

⁹¹ For the sake of transparency, at the time of writing my dissertation, my blog is still publicly accessible at <https://bihaenggi.wordpress.com/>

what aspects of their lives and personal feelings to share, knowing that they could not avoid public scrutiny. Through their presentation of ordinariness and focus on their lived realities, as I have discussed throughout this dissertation, creators actively work against representations of cultural difference as exotic or exceptional. But in their everyday lives - both online and offline - they are also constantly reminded of their outsiderhood and they must negotiate what their foreigner status means for them, while also receiving messages from others about what being a foreigner in Korea entails.

The travel blog entries of my early twenties are vaguely directed toward my family and friends, while they also carry a tone of teaching/helping others. In sharing my candid experiences online, and doing so publicly, I provide recommendations and insights into what it is “really like” to live in Korea as a White, American woman. This was before the real era of social media influencers, and yet, without really trying to optimize my content for search engines, I received both positive responses and questions from others who hoped to someday live, work, study, and/or travel to Korea themselves. These dual functions of content creation were also shared by my interviewees. Their public online presence ranged from infrequent blog posts with only a handful of dedicated readers to YouTube channels with over twenty thousand subscribers, but regardless of their popularity, many of them shared a similar trajectory of transnational connection. That is, they initially approached their content creation - be it on blogs, Instagram, or YouTube - with a desire to stay connected. Elizabeth started blogging and making videos to inform her friends in the United States about her time spent living in Gwangju, and Brooke also launched her YouTube channel as a way to keep friends and family informed. But as their content began to gain traction, and they saw that they might provide guidance for other

individuals like them, they began to realize, as Sofia expressed in our conversation, that their content was not just about them.

Over time, the creators I spoke with began to notice that their public-facing content was resonating with unexpected audiences. By sharing their own trials and tribulations, creators found they could help others. Of her YouTube presence, Margaret remarked, “the channel...I don’t feel like it’s about myself. It’s more about...being helpful, showing interesting places.” Those of us who have used our own experiences as “content” are not solely motivated by publicity or the prospect of “fame,” rather, it is (at least in part) gratifying to realize that you can potentially benefit others simply by sharing your life online. In part as a therapeutic reminder to myself, I wrote in another blog entry from 2013, “Sometimes, you need to open your heart...Being abroad does not mean your home life disappears or becomes less important, which is why the internet is so necessary...It’s just good to know that people don’t forget you when you’re across the world.” As I have illustrated in previous chapters, whether we are connecting with strangers or loved ones, self-expression on online platforms is used to transmit emotions and to constitute a sense of comfort and belonging. But before identifying the ways in which content creators can reclaim agency through their participation on platforms, I unpack the various narratives of foreign womanhood that they must navigate.

The first section addresses audience expectations, real or otherwise. That is, creators discussed how their audience interacts with them (and vice versa), alluding to assumptions about being experts on Korea, despite living normal lives and viewing themselves as ordinary. Following this discussion, I briefly examine other expectations of what it means to be a foreigner in Korea as perpetuated by mainstream entertainment media. Next, I consider the offline realities of women as foreigners as a way to better understand content creation as a necessary outlet for

self-expression and communication. In our conversations, many of my interviewees disclosed their frustrations with the treatment they received living in Korea, even though most of them enjoyed living there overall. These offline experiences provide context for story-making on social media. However, as creators leverage online spaces to offer more “authentic” versions of reality, they also open themselves to the critique of others. The penultimate section considers some of the more serious issues that emerge when foreigners offer their experiences as evidence; namely, they have faced surveillance, gatekeeping, and breaches of privacy by other foreigners. This can further creators’ sense of isolation as they are alienated both within Korean society writ large and, at times, within the community of foreigners. And yet, smaller bloggers and vloggers continue to create. This chapter concludes by illustrating social media’s role in reconstituting belonging and one’s sense of self. By continuing to express themselves creatively and tell their own life stories online, foreign women can combat the compounding external forces and control their own narratives.

“I just live life normally”: Audience Expectations and the Perceived Expertise of Experience

For anyone who posts on social media, the audience - imagined or otherwise - plays a role in what we post. The women I interviewed initially thought of their readers and viewers as their friends, family, and acquaintances who may be interested to learn not necessarily about *Korea* in its entirety, but about how their loved one was getting by. Other audiences, however, are likely to be less concerned with the individual - that is, at least until they feel the growing familiarity of parasociality, as with the creators described in previous chapters - and more concerned with their role in the dissemination of information. Somewhat irritated, Margaret spoke about this perception of her audience using her as a “weather app,” a reliable inanimate

tool for disseminating information: “They think I’m this weather app...or like, this travel planner person. It’s always the same question that I’m always asking myself: ‘why don’t you just use Google?’” Anecdotally, she said that she has seen other YouTubers echoing her complaints on their Instagram Stories, alluding to the seemingly commonplace expectations for creators to constantly provide free, trusted information.

Due to her own difficulties navigating the Korean education system and exchange program as an international student, Elena hoped her content could alleviate some of this stress for others. However, she too found that she was flooded with emails or direct messages from her YouTube viewers, speculating that,

a lot of people just prefer asking others to search for their stuff done searching for themselves, which is the main reason why I just decided to stop sending - or, replying to every single message on like Instagram or Twitter because it was just constantly the same message from like some people and I was like, “I told you, I’m sorry, like, you can read everything on that on the website.”

Even with few followers, the fact that these women offer their experiences as evidence online seems reason enough for their viewers to see them as reliable sources of information. Here, the role of the foreigner is prescribed as not only someone possessing firsthand knowledge of Korea, but also someone whose value is tied to their ability to provide something for someone else. This dynamic reflects the demands put upon women more generally for their immaterial labor, freely given and un-/under-compensated (e.g., Duffy, 2017). Additionally, expectations of expertise create distance between the creator and her audience; she is viewed as simply another online resource and/or she is positioned as a kind of pseudo-celebrity with exclusive access to Korea/n culture.

However, this was not how creators described the ways in which they hoped to be viewed by others, or how they thought about themselves in relation to their audiences. The creators with

whom I spoke were fairly adamant about their regular, non-celebrity statuses, wanting their audiences to know, as Taylor put it, that they just “live life normally.” Although “foreigners-in-Korea” is a relatively niche genre within the seemingly endless amount of content that is regularly uploaded to YouTube, there are a number of these creators who *have* reached the level of celebrity. For example, Dave Levene (“The World of Dave”), a White American living in Korea, created his channel in 2006 and was one of the first YouTubers in this genre recognized by Korean mainstream media. He now has nearly two million subscribers, a staggering number that has been surpassed by “Korean Englishman,” a channel run by two White British men, Josh and Ollie. Even less widely popular YouTubers have reached a certain degree of celebrity status due to their dedicated following; “cari cakes” was mentioned multiple times by my interviewees as having a legitimate fanbase.⁹² Lucy explained that Cari “gets a lot of people who like, religiously wait for her uploads” and “purposely put it on Instagram stories so that she would like, mention them ‘cause they really want to receive her attention.”

Being treated as a celebrity was not popular among my interviewees, and just as their vlogs represented their normal lives in Korea, creators also alluded to their own ordinariness, despite putting their lives online and receiving regular engagement. “We’re all doing the same thing...just trying to work and live our lives,” Lucy commented, emphasizing that she and her viewers/followers are not so different. Her having a public platform did not affect the way she saw herself, and she felt uncomfortable about the idea that others might view her as a “celebrity.”

⁹² Albeit, Cari is still a “smaller” creator in the grand scope of YouTube and Internet fame. I have separated vloggers into three “tiers” based on audience size (see: Introduction), but even the top tier are not truly celebrities. While they may exhibit Marwick and boyd’s (2011) discussion of micro-celebrity as a performative practice and mindset, they do not necessarily consider their own audience as a fanbase. Understandably, the relationship to one’s audience is on a sliding scale; while it is perhaps easy for someone with 10K followers to view these individuals as “friends,” it is easier for someone with nearly twenty times that to approach their audience as fans (especially, as with Farina’s “jotatoes,” the audience members characterize *themselves* as fans). Regardless of who specifically my interviewees differentiated themselves from, the point here is that they were explicit about the relationship they hoped to have (and to maintain) with their audience.

Lucy mentioned that, because of her videos, some people also joined the TALK program and upon arriving in Korea and seeing her, they excitedly greeted her as though she were someone famous. She compared this experience to the more extreme version of the YouTuber/subscriber, celebrity/fan dynamic between Cari and her audience, something Lucy had no desire to emulate.

Rather than aim for widespread popularity, creators commonly discussed their goals to be considered by their audience as friends. Although Taylor did explicitly call her YouTube subscribers her “fans,” she also said that she hoped her role was “not some guru or advice-giver” but instead, “like a friend, like somebody [my audience] can go to after a long day and just feel like they’re connected to me.” Similarly, Brooke hoped that her intended audience (i.e., other foreigners) saw her as a “friend giving advice” and Sofia remarked that - despite her conflicting feelings about her audience’s suspected misinformation about Korea - she wanted her readers and viewers to feel “like they’re my best friend.”

By sharing one’s personal life and private feelings on social media, the creator establishes an intimate relationship with their audience (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Friendship insinuates trust, something that is necessary when providing a narrative that may not align with an audience’s expectations. In a country that is not always especially foreigner-friendly, establishing friendships - even if they are imagined - with similar others outside of Korea can be one way for creators to take their sense of belonging into their own hands. To ensure their audiences will reciprocate this friendship dynamic, creators can strive to be authentic, consistent, open, and share real, intimate details of their lives, common micro-celebrity tactics as described by various social media scholars (e.g., Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2015). Their knowledge of Korea, in turn, can also be seen as more credible if they successfully establish that trust between “friends.” Most of my interviewees acknowledged that

they wanted their audience to trust them in some capacity, and as such, honesty⁹³ was a common theme.

“I try to be like my most authentic self,” Hannah noted. Although we struggled to land on a succinct understanding of what it meant to be “authentic” online,⁹⁴ Hannah equated authenticity to maintaining her own “voice” in her blog posts and not diverging from her offline persona. This notion of voice is crucial for the creator to control her narrative, and will be interrogated further later in this chapter, but for the audience, being legibly “authentic” is integral to trusting one’s perspective. Relatedly, creators were often quick to acknowledge that they are only speaking from their singular perspectives, which they hoped would not be taken as universal. Elena saw a tension between “keeping the content honest” and “not going onto [sic] a full on rant about how much I hate some of the things about [Korea].” As a result, she said that she tries to be more “objective” than personal in what she posts.⁹⁵ ⁹⁶ Sofia’s motto was to “always be honest,” but during our conversation she admitted that she still felt “pressure” for her to “show Korea in a good light,” in part because she has received backlash about her content:

Sometimes I actually get like, some really angry messages from people saying like, “how dare you talk that way about Korean people?” And it’s usually from people who have never been abroad to Korea or like, don’t know anything about Korean culture....what I’m saying comes from experience because I speak the language, I know the culture, I know the people...I know what I’m talking about.

⁹³ Insinuating both telling the “truth” about the “real” Korea, as well as being transparent about one’s personal information and experiences.

⁹⁴ Scholarly discussions of “authenticity” on social media are outlined in the Introduction to this dissertation.

⁹⁵ Shifting from international student advice, she now mainly focuses on sharing her knowledge about delicious vegan food in Korea. As far as cultural topics go, food is relatively “safe,” as it combines the emotional and embodied (the consumption of food, food porn shots, etc., similar to descriptions in Chapter Three) with the less deeply personal; if your focus is food, likely people will not pry about your dating life or the trials and tribulations of being a foreign woman abroad.

⁹⁶ As discussed in Chapter One, distancing oneself from more “emotional” or negatively valenced content can also be a tactic for self-preservation. If one thinks about her content as potentially helping her get a job, or even just being seen by future employers, it is important for her to find a balance between authenticity and so-called “objectivity.”

Through her knowledge of and proximity to Korea, Sofia defends her own expertise, distinguishing herself from her readers and/or viewers who she assumes lack the authority gained through direct experience. Despite any aims for equitable friend-like relationships with their followers, creators' firsthand experience of Korea/n culture - as Sofia put it: "I know what's up. I know how to, you know, navigate like a local" - scripts them as experts by proximity, a role that is in part of their own making (sharing experiential knowledge online is a demonstration of expertise), but is also a role given to them by their audience(s).

In her work on Korean drama viewership, Marion Schutze (2013) argues that when international fans seek to verify their cultural interpretations, they turn to "cultural experts" to help them decode meaning. These "experts" are judged by their immersion in Korean culture and their authority is linked to lived experience (Schutze, 2013). As such, creators - regardless of their length of stay, language ability, knowledge of national history, etc. - are treated as having Korean expertise, which can be frustrating insofar as they are repeatedly treated as outsiders in their daily lives. These tensions between online audience expectations and offline constructions of what it means to be a foreign woman in South Korea contribute to the ongoing negotiation of identity for these women in particular; how can they "know what's up" while never fully escaping the periphery of society and culture?

In the same way that my interviewees discussed their own ordinariness - even Sofia's claim of "local" knowledge does not necessarily make her an *expert*, it just makes her fit in - they also wanted to remind their audiences of the ordinariness of Korea. Some of my interviewees voiced concerns in our conversations that at least some of their audience members were viewing Korea through rose-colored glasses. One of the most blatant responses on this front was from Sofia, who suspected that a majority of her audience was what she referred to as

“weeaboo⁹⁷ trash.” She defined “weeaboos,” in this case, as those who saw Korea as a “magical fairy tale land” that can “do no wrong,” and similarly viewed Korean men as “fantasy Prince[s] on a white horse coming to take them away.” These generalizations reflect the images of Korea perpetuated by television dramas, which, like so much fictional entertainment, create story-worlds that are not intended to represent reality. However, if non-Korean fans of dramas or *Hallyu* are only exposed to Korea/n culture through manufactured industries, their knowledge of the country can slip into blanket stereotypes.

Perhaps in an attempt to combat these misconceptions, my interviewees frequently discussed Korea as being “just like everywhere else.” That is, their lives in Korea, while conceivably novel upon first arrival, were not inherently distinct from their lives elsewhere. When it came to presenting her real, everyday life in Korea, Taylor noted that her commitment to authenticity stemmed from her own expectations about Korea being skewed by other foreigners’ online content. She mentioned how some people might be “disappointed” if they arrived to her YouTube channel:

so many YouTubers I watched before coming to Korea made Korea seem like some utopia. Like it’s the perfect country. Everything’s great. Like everything’s so exotic and fun and it’s like, it’s not how it is, you know, all the time. So people see these things about Korea or they even see me and they like, idolize you. And I’m like, listen, life in Korea is not to be idolized. It’s hard! It’s stressful.

This quote not only emphasizes Taylor’s desire to provide a counter-narrative that does not rely on the exoticization of difference, unlike the other YouTubers she describes as providing distorted images of Korea.

⁹⁷ Commonly used/understood on the Anglophone Internet, the term “weeaboo” is used to refer to a non-Japanese individual who has an unhealthy obsession with Japanese culture. Notably, both Taylor and Margaret used the term “Koreaboo” to describe individuals who fetishize Korea. “Just living in Korea or just by dating a Korean or having a Korean friend,” Taylor explained, “people will call you a Koreaboo.”

By working to position both themselves and Korea as “ordinary,” my interviewees construct themselves as non-experts, simply living their lives outside of their country/culture of origin. Many people outside of the country may first be exposed to Korea through entertainment media like dramas (Schutze, 2013) or K-pop (Jin, 2016; Otmazgin & Lyan, 2014), which glosses over the mundane in favor of the extraordinary. As such, user-generated content like YouTube videos or personal blogs offers insight into the “real” Korea and access to individuals whose lived experiences authenticate their expertise. This narrative is somewhat at odds with how foreigners are viewed and valued at state and ideological levels, where the conflation of race and nation, combined with efforts to promote surface-level diversity can stifle one’s feeling of security, belonging, and identity. At the same time that (some) foreign creators work to share more realistic stories about life in Korea, mainstream entertainment media constructs stories about *them*; that is, the Korean media also presents a particular image of foreigners. The next section examines how mainstream media approaches foreign identity and considers how popular culture is involved in perpetuating multiculturalism discourse.

(Re)presenting the Representative: Foreigners in Entertainment Media

The popular reality television talk show *Non-Summit* (비정상회담)⁹⁸ is one of the most direct portrayals of “transparent” discussions with non-Koreans living in Korea, assigning its twelve foreign panelists roles as “national representatives.” *Non-Summit*’s inclusion of male panelists who have assimilated, speaking Korean and performing their understanding of and subscription to cultural norms, yet who are still foreign, promotes what Kyung-lae Kang (2018) argues is a “synthesis of exoticism and familiarity [which] helps build solidarity between foreigners and Korean guests (as well as viewers)” (p. 63). The show does engage with panelists’

⁹⁸ “Abnormal Summit”

anecdotes of racism or discrimination, however, as Kang (2018) also points out, it rarely goes into depth on any of these issues. Instead, *Non-Summit* cultivates an idealistic philosophy that reflects the Korean government's attempt to create a "multicultural society through nothing more than solicitation of tolerance toward other races and cultures" (Kang, 2018, p. 66). Oh (2020) has extended this argument, noting that the show constructs the ideal subject of this new multicultural society as a superficial cosmopolitan. "Superficial cosmopolitanism," Oh (2020) argues, "reflects internalization of Western interests to not call into question global inequality, and it reflects the nation's goal of promoting an instrumental global citizenship that does not create a multicultural challenge to national identification and belonging" (p. 266). Rather than promoting a cosmopolitanism that is inclusive of difference, as described in Chapter Two, mainstream media's reliance on perpetuating Western dominance is obscured by a universalist and post-racial discourse.

Non-Summit relies on surface-level multiculturalism and links cosmopolitanism to heteronormative masculinity and homosocial friendship (Oh, 2020), but this does not translate to the representation and realities of women.⁹⁹ Instead, *Global Talk Show* (미녀들의 수다)¹⁰⁰ is a more relevant example of the ways in which mainstream media directly engages with women's experiences as foreigners in Korea. This show, which aired from 2006-2010, featured single women in their twenties, each from a different country, discussing their experiences living in Korea and at times performing "talents" (singing, dancing, etc.). Film studies scholar Jiwon Ahn

⁹⁹ Not to mention non-binary individuals, transgender individuals, or anyone who sits outside the normative boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality and cisgender normativity.

¹⁰⁰ The show's Korean and English titles are different. Oh (2020) translates the Korean as "Beautiful Women's Chat," whereas Ahn (2009) refers to the program as "Beauty Chatter." I have also heard it commonly referred to as the (rather clunky) title "Chit Chat with Beautiful Ladies," a name that is somehow simultaneously infantilizing (use of "chit chat," rather than conversation or discussion) and objectifying (the audience should know these women are beautiful).

(2009) argues that the show can in some respect be viewed as a “colonial exhibition,” publicly displaying the (beautiful) bodies of others, but that this critique should also take into account the notion of voice; these women, after all, have the power to speak - and speak back - to hosts, guests, and other panelists. Ahn (2009) also proposes viewing the show through the lens of an international beauty pageant, in which the woman-as-nation trope is embedded in a discourse of the “family of nations” (Banet-Wesier, 1999); “the real object of scrutiny in *Beauty Chatter* is not so much the foreign cultures embodied by the ‘Beauties,’ as South Korea as a nation in transition sketched via the testimonies of the ‘Beauties’” (Ahn, 2009). This resonates with Korea’s “multiculturalism” discourse as introduced in Chapter One, which often promotes diversity and inclusion, while still maintaining a core Korean culture and prioritizing rigid assimilation (Walton, 2020).

Another popular television show that has depicted the realities of foreign women’s experiences in Korea is *Love in Asia*, which ended its eight year run in 2014. Its focus on international marriages between Korean men and non-Korean women (i.e., “marriage migrants”) has earned the KBS¹⁰¹ program several awards that reflect its commitment to promoting multiculturalism (Cha, Lee, & Park, 2016). Unlike *Global Talk Show*, which predominantly featured White and/or Western women, *Love in Asia* included “dark-skinned, lower-class foreign brides, primarily from non-Western countries, who are expected to abide by Korean norms” (Cha, Lee, & Park, 2016, p. 1473). While popular media often ignored migrant workers altogether, or depicted them as temporary and/or disposable, marriage migrants could be seen as valuable due to their potential to conform to Confucian family structures, being subsumed into Korean culture via their subordinate position as wives and mothers (Cha, Lee, & Park, 2016).

¹⁰¹ Korean Broadcasting System

Kang (2018) points out that, while *Non-Summit* opened some space for public dialogue about race, ethnicity, and globalization, *Love in Asia* often focused on women's suffering, arguing that the show "papers over the foreign spouse's misery by praising her courageous behavior, patience, and 'sacrifice' so that she can be a 'good wife'... seeking to transform this pathetic life story into a touching narrative of assimilation" (p. 63). Notably, my interviewees mentioned that their own abilities to assimilate should serve to integrate them more successfully, but this was generally not the case. Some of them mentioned how their nationalities shaped their experiences as foreigners, regardless of the length of their stay or their degree of assimilation, resonating with the manufactured scripts of entertainment media.

In one of her university classes, Taylor was watching the 2016 election and said that her classmates would repeatedly ask her questions regarding Americans' apparent support of Trump. "They definitely treat you as like, the end-all, be-all of Americans," she remarked, "a lot of people tend to treat you as like, the *ambassador* and they'll ask you, 'why did Trump do this? Why is Trump doing that?' and I'm like, I've been in Korea for four years." Again, her emphasis on the length of time spent in the country distances her from American politics, yet she can still not fully escape the prescriptive dimensions of her national identity:

I've been assimilated in the culture. I've lived here longer than some Koreans even have. I'm like, at this point, I'm just me, so I don't see myself as an ambassador all the time. But other people do.

As with the panelists on *Global Talk Show*, being ascribed the role of sole representative for one's country of origin perpetuates the notion of woman-as-nation. In doing so, it positions Korea as modern and progressive, part of the "international family of nations" (Ahn, 2009), while also signaling individual citizenship as women's bodies become stand-ins for national identity (Banet-Weiser, 1999), meaning that to be so associated with one's legal nationality and

home culture, one cannot escape her outsider status. When asked explicitly about the extent to which she too might feel pressure to be an “ambassador” of the U.S., Sofia worked to delegitimize her ascribed role, stating,

I mean, definitely, but like, I don't really...feel that pressure either because like, I'm a well-behaved person, you know, I'm not breaking any laws or I'm not...you know, doing anything that's terrible. But like, if people here are terrible to me...then I'm of course terrible back and I don't care like, when they say, 'Oh, foreigners are like this,' because I'm not gonna sit there and take like any kind of like, verbal or physical abuse from anybody. Like, it's not my responsibility - if they think I'm a certain way - to change their mind.

In this statement, Americans are discursively constructed as “foreigners,” thus conflating the two categories and alluding to the international dominance of the U.S. However, the passing mention of her receiving “verbal or physical abuse” also insinuates her need to defend and protect herself as an individual. At times, the solo representative of a group may be treated preferentially - for example, in our conversation, Lucy observed that White male teachers in Korea “are really desired.” But while difference can be beneficial for individuals in privileged groups, researchers have demonstrated that difference is often detrimental for women and/or people of color, and that representativeness can be socially debilitating (Thompson & Sekaquaptewa, 2002). Sticking out as the only member of a more disadvantaged group can create a “spotlight effect” that not only results in heightened feelings of scrutinization, but also severe negative emotions and the burden of representing one's entire group (Crosby, King, & Savitsky, 2014). Being a foreign woman in Korea often means being the center of attention, and having the additional quality of darker skin can add yet another layer of stigma. While all women in Korea may face some level of “objectifi[cation]” [Elena], “abuse” [Sofia], or sexual harassment [Lucy], social/cultural subordination manifests very differently depending on how one is racialized; a White woman on

Global Talk Show confidently critiquing Korean society is portrayed as categorically distinct from the “obedient” marriage migrant from Cambodia on *Love in Asia* (Cha, Lee, & Park, 2016).

In the excerpt above, Sofia resists expectations of obedience. As the only self-identified mixed-race woman of color¹⁰² among my participants, Sofia’s firm stance on refusing to endure discrimination or subordination perhaps reflects her experiences with marginalization in the United States. In her examination of the “hypervisibility” of African American women in South Korea and Japan, sociologist Asia Bento (2020) argues that these women at times compared the stigma they felt in Asia to that in the U.S. and thus were able to approach new circumstances with previously-cultivated resilience. Bento’s (2020) findings also demonstrate that African American women responded to their marginality by actually leaning into their roles as “racial ambassadors,” while also periodically “staring back.” That is, they acknowledged the “stigma attached to their difference” and also “downplayed the stigma to protect their psychological well-being” (Bento, 2020, p. 561). Although Sofia is not Black, protection over her own well-being emerges here as both valuable and necessary. When constantly encountering one’s own stigmatized hypervisibility, strength and security can be found in self-reliance (Bento, 2020). Online, not only does the creator have the potential to be connected to others of similar backgrounds, allowing them to escape their offline “solo” status, but the blogger, vlogger, or Instagrammer is able to construct her own identity, which can be empowering.

The Korean entertainment industry provides a skewed vision of what it means to be a foreign woman in Korea. This is not so different from Hollywood, which has been long criticized for its disparities in the representation of marginalized groups in films, television, and music. However, while there have been attempts to create alternative forms of multicultural

¹⁰² Her racial identity is important to her, and likely to her followers as well, but to maintain some degree of anonymity, I will not specify further her race or cultural heritage.

broadcasting¹⁰³ produced by/for migrants, mainstream programming in Korea is invariably dominated by Korean perspectives and the government continues to obstruct grassroots multiculturalism organizations (Prey, 2011). Additionally, recent empirical findings suggest the correlation between the consumption of mainstream “multicultural television” and attitudes toward gender equality; while viewing these programs did not point to notable changes in attitudes toward foreigners, it did correlate with a greater acceptance of sexism (Kim, Curran, & Zhen, 2020). As the authors point out, this is not only dangerous for making national progress in shifting the status of women, but “considering the increasing popularity of Korean cultural products worldwide (i.e. the Korean wave), failure to improve the portrayals of minorities in Korean television may result not only in Koreans’ maintaining sexist views, but in the spread of these views around the world.” (Kim, Curran, & Zhen, 2020, pp. 11-12).

With this in mind, it is possible that sites that are largely free from state intervention or regulation - namely, YouTube - can be fruitful for the promotion of non-dominant narratives. With its (initially) low(er) barrier of entry, early versions of YouTube (particularly in the U.S. and the UK) were a place where user-generated, rather than industry-dominated, content could thrive. Speaking to the work of Asian American creators, Leland Taberes (2019) makes it clear that, while YouTube is not disentangled from mainstream culture and has increasingly become professionalized via corporate incentives, it has also long been a space for those traditionally excluded from mainstream media “to authorize their self representation, redress stereotypes, and galvanize political activism.” With the ability to go online and write themselves into chat rooms, vlogs, and social media, individuals can imagine and create alternative media that are not as

¹⁰³ Specifically, Prey (2011) discusses Migrant World Television (MWTV), a grassroots organization originating in the migrant workers’ movement and whose programming is created entirely by Korea’s migrant community.

constrained¹⁰⁴ by corporate demands for lowest common denominator programming. For foreigners in Korea, content creation can in part serve to “correct” for the partial perspectives of popular culture, but it can also be a means of self-preservation for women in particular. In the next section, I discuss not only how the women with whom I spoke navigate their prescribed identity as “foreigners,” but also specifically address the complexities of being a foreign (Western) woman in South Korea. While many of their experiences of being Othered on the basis of their gender, race, and/or nationality occur offline, “real life” is always entwined with and informs life online.

The “Double-Edged Sword” of Multiculturalism: Determining the Value of Race, Gender, and Nation

“The whole society changes a lot, but there’s still so much rooted in like, this history and these old ideas... you still get this sense of like, well, you’re not supposed to be here.”

(Interview with Elena, October 19, 2019)

As discussed in Chapter One, the Korean government and tourism industries have harnessed social media to actively cultivate an image of inclusive multiculturalism, inviting foreigners to feel welcome and at home. At the same time, foreign content creators leverage their presence on social media to offer their lived experiences to showcase (a curated version of) what their lives are *really* like in Korea and to describe where/how they find themselves fitting into society. Most of the women I interviewed spent a number of years living in Korea and, over time, felt like they had assimilated to the best of their abilities. They had picked up and/or tried to communicate in Korean, to acknowledge differences in generation and tradition, and to adopt

¹⁰⁴ Albeit, constraints still exist, largely due to increasingly commercialized platform structures and the demands of corporate sponsorships and governmentality. These constraints are put into conversation with users’ labor in greater depth in Chapter One.

local habits and mannerisms. And yet, they were continually reminded of their visible foreigner status and forced to regularly navigate their peripheral existence,¹⁰⁵ which unavoidably shapes how and what they share online. This section illuminates the lived experiences of foreign women and how race, gender, and nation are valued by the state and society to contextualize content creation as an outlet for storytelling and controlling one's own narrative.

Taylor, a White American woman who had just graduated from college and had lived in Korea for four years at the time of our interview, mentioned that she continued to face a number of challenges that she would likely not if she were in the U.S. "You know, 'cause when you're a foreigner, you're a minority, and just like many other countries, minorities face a lot of difficulties with discrimination" she began, going on to state that part of these difficulties stem from being perceived as "temporary." Although her experience as a White American in South Korea is categorically different from that of minoritized groups in, for example, the United States, being constantly ascribed a timeline to departure can be taxing. "When you're here for a shorter time," Taylor observed, "you lay on the surface of Korean culture and how much you're accepted. But then when you're stuck at the surface level for four years...it gets really tiring really fast." The notion of being on the "surface" of culture reflects Taylor's perceived inability to fit in, not due to her own disinterest or visa status, but based on others communicating to her that she does not (and perhaps will never) belong. As I have described elsewhere in this dissertation, the use of the word "foreigner" to describe non-Koreans is not only the word these

¹⁰⁵ It is not lost on me that this existence on the periphery emerges very differently for, for example, individuals who are undocumented in the United States or low income migrant workers in South Korea. Because the women I spoke with were also majority White, they also do not experience marginalization to the same degree as darker skinned individuals or people from less industrialized and/or less wealthy countries. I hope that future research is able to explore the lived experiences (and creative production) of individuals from less privileged positions to provide a fuller picture of how foreign women in Korea navigate their identities.

individuals use to describe themselves,¹⁰⁶ but it is also pervasive as an all-inclusive term for anyone who does not clearly fit the definition of a Korean citizen. Foreigners and Koreans are often constructed as binary opposites.¹⁰⁷

In part to resist assimilation during Japanese occupation (1910-1945), Korean elites regularly used the term *minjok* (민족) to refer to the Korean people, thus promoting a nationalism directly bound to ethnicity. Literally defined as “a nation of one clan,” *minjok* became a ubiquitous term to reify Korean solidarity even in the face of Japanese rule and the loss of autonomy as a nation (H. Choe, 2006). The conflation of race, ethnicity, and nationality was never completely dissolved, meaning that citizenship, though at last *legally* inclusive by the 1990s (H. Choe, 2006), is still often socially/culturally linked to relative homogeneity. The contemporary state-led push for multiculturalism,¹⁰⁸ Walton (2020) has argued, is

at most a cultural assimilation policy predicated on socializing and integrating a particular group of people with migrant backgrounds to become more ‘like’ other Koreans so they can fit into existing structures and productively contribute to Korean society without challenging an imagined Korean ethno-racial homogeneity. (p. 841)

As such, it is rather unsurprising that, regardless of language ability, relationship status, or cultural assimilation, it would be difficult to breach that surface level of societal integration.

Interpretation and translation scholar Jon H. Bahk-Halberg (2010) argues that the “misuse and overuse of the word ‘foreigner’” in South Korea is not simply a harmless term for a non-Korean, but has significant negative connotations, particularly for native English speakers. The

¹⁰⁶ And when I was in Korea, we also labeled ourselves as “foreigners,” echoing the term used for us by our Korean classmates, shop owners and employees, teachers, random passers by etc.

¹⁰⁷ With members of the Korean diaspora (e.g., Korean Americans, etc.) fitting somewhere in-between. For further in-depth discussions of the logics of transnationalism and Korean migrant identity, see: Lee, H. (2018). *Between foreign and family : Return migration and identity construction among Korean Americans and Korean Chinese* (Asian American studies today). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

¹⁰⁸ Also known as “다문화” / *daemunhwa* or “many/multiple cultures”

ubiquitous term “foreigner” or “외국인” (*oegugin*) often connotes “someone who is clearly thought of as outside, far away, and separated from others” (Bahk-Halberg, 2010, p. 137). Similar to Taylor’s negative temporal and spatial descriptions of her own outsider identity, Elena discussed her own challenges as an international student; in the excerpt at the beginning of this section, she confesses that foreigners often get the feeling that they are “not supposed to be here,” especially outside of Seoul. Elena went on to explicitly characterize being a foreigner in Korea as a “double-edged sword,” recognizing that it was a privilege for her to study abroad, but that it also came with its challenges. Namely, as a young, White European woman, she regularly receives “judgment” when she demonstrates an attitude or behavior deemed “not very Korean.”¹⁰⁹ Additionally, she noted that her being “blonde and tall” led to her frequently being objectified; even when she was treated nicely, she felt as though older women¹¹⁰ in particular treated her as their “toy” or “their little pet.”

Taylor and Margaret echoed similar issues regarding gender and objectification. After three years in Korea, Margaret remarked, “I will never fit in,” and part of the reason for her feeling this way stemmed from her perceived lack of independence. One could posit that the limits on her independent living were largely due to barriers in language and culture, certainly relevant factors for most foreigners in Korea, but Margaret mentioned that it was her relationship with her husband that also made people “not care” about her. That is, as her Korean husband’s “appendix,” she felt that she had little agency, and like this organ, she could be removed with

¹⁰⁹ This resonates with Kim’s (2015) work on the “racial mundane” as described in Chapter Three, in which habits, mannerisms, and embodied behaviors become measurements for inclusion.

¹¹⁰ Specifically, Elena used the term “아줌마” / *ajumma*, meaning married or middle-aged woman. This word triggers a stereotypical image of Korean “aunties” who are defined as being - according to urbandictionary.com - so ubiquitous and specific they represent a third gender defined by “permed hair,” “physical strength,” and being “scary and...closer to a male than a female in many ways.” This “top definition” is obviously problematic, but *some* similar stereotypes can be found on namu.wiki (a Korean-language wiki site). There, *ajummas*’ physical strength and social power is also emphasized, as well as characteristic “nagging,” but the author(s) also warns to avoid prejudice as this is simply a caricature of some individuals.

few complications. The objects that these women compared themselves to should be taken seriously, as language not only conveys meaning, but builds identities. The term “pet” insinuates the need to be cared for, while also communicating subordination and control; “toy” reflects another degree of powerlessness, as toys are to be enjoyed temporarily, but are also inanimate and disposed of when they are overused or outgrown. When one discursively becomes their partner’s “appendix,” they are given life without autonomy; at any moment, she may be viewed as a liability.

To fully address these women’s frustration with their perceptions of gender (and racial) bias and discrimination in Korea, it is crucial to contextualize this discussion within the roots of Confucianism. Korean studies scholar Martina Deuchler (1992) points out that the most fundamental feature of Confucianism in Korea is the patrilineal lineage system, which not only preserved preference for the firstborn son, but also led to married women being stripped of their connection to their families and ancestors. In Neo-Confucian¹¹¹ Korea, women, who lacked rights to property ownership, education, and civic participation, were prescribed roles associated with specific subordinate behaviors, such as the “virtuous wife” or “obedient daughter-in-law” (Deuchler, 1992). With this in mind, Margaret’s description of herself as her husband’s “appendix” is understandable. While their private and interpersonal relationship may be harmonious, others may view the marital dynamic between a German woman and Korean man as incongruous with Confucian ideology. That is, Margaret’s frustration with her position in relation to her husband is not only due to any existing barriers or language, culture, or citizenship

¹¹¹ “Neo-Confucianism” is a philosophy originating in China to create a more rational/secular form of Confucianism. As Deuchler (1992) points out, though, Korea’s adaptation of Neo-Confucianism diverged from that of China and ultimately became more rigid. Kim (2003) notes that this philosophy “governed [Korea’s] politics, religion, and social system for over 500 years.” This resurgence of Confucianism flourished in particular around the 11th century.

status, but her desire for and/or expectations of independence are incongruous with the roles historically given to Korean wives.

Of course, Korean society has transformed in regard to women's roles, with more women pursuing a college education, entering (and excelling in) the workforce, and delaying marriage (M.K. Choe, 2006). In particular, younger generations - which my interviewees also often characterized as exceptions to the rule of prejudice against foreigners - women, and those who have had more contact with or exposure to Western cultures have been less likely to adhere to traditional Confucian values (Hyun, 2001). Nevertheless, Confucianism still shapes contemporary Korean society, particularly when it comes to the ways in which women are valued. While Neo-Confucianism grew to serve as a stand-in for "Koreanness," its reputation as the dominant ideology was being replaced by capitalism and consumerism of the 20th century (Kim, 2003). As such, the Neo-Confucian governmentality of women - that is, that women were "subjectless bodies" existing primarily to bear life - was not replaced, but instead, combined with capitalism, resulting in new ways to control women's bodies. In Korea's consumer society, "Beauty has become the new standard of a woman's value" (Kim, 2003, p. 103), another factor that complicates the experiences of foreign women.

"Being a foreign female¹¹² in general," Taylor began while we discussed gender differences in Korea, "[means that you receive] a lot of fetishization from Korean men."

Considering the ways in which Sofia framed her potential viewers as doing something similar -

¹¹² I also wrote about some of my own experiences "being a foreign female in Korea" on my Wordpress blog. Namely, I said that my "white privilege still exists" and results in some "special treatment." But I also wrote, "sometimes I worry that if I'm with a Korean guy the old people think I'm just a cheap girl and we're walking around looking for a love motel (because American girls carry with them the stereotype of being easy - and people wonder why the first thing guys ask you in a club is "where are you from?" -_-)." In a "vlog" posted in 2013 (linked on my blog) by one of my best friends in Korea at the time (who is American and mixed race Pakistani and white), she mentioned that we all frequently experienced this go-to pick-up-line at night clubs in Seoul. This is an interesting observation that ironically parallels this same line being used on anyone in the U.S. who appears to be "Other."

that is, fetishizing Korean men - it is crucial to also consider how dynamics of objectification can occur in other circumstances. Resonating with Elena's being "very objectified," Taylor went on to explain, "they [Korean men] treat you as just like a sex object. They view you as temporary, just a fun one night stand because you're foreign and they think all foreigners are so sexually open." While there is no room in this chapter to discuss in depth the histories of sex and sexuality in South Korea, foreign women's being perceived as "sexually open" can be understood, at least in part, in relation to the influx and preference for Western women in the Korean sex industry. In the 1990s, Russian sex workers in particular were not only actively sought out by Korean men for their exoticism, but also because they fulfilled a desire for dominance over the West (Kim & Fu, 2008). Speaking to this directly, Lucy said, "I'm constantly sexualized and harassed here. Significantly more than most of my friends. Partly because I'm in a rural area, partly because I look - I don't think I look Russian, but they think I look Russian." While Confucianism dictated "extreme sexual segregation and a double standard of sexual morality" requiring chastity for women (Shim, 2011), specifically those who would become "virtuous wives," the value of foreign women's bodies¹¹³ is, to some extent, linked to their use as commodities.

Taylor's relationship with her Korean boyfriend, not just men in general, also posed challenges. While she expressed her gratitude for his love and support, she noted that she found it "frustrating that people always...consider him an authority figure." His power in the relationship stemmed not from their own interpersonal negotiations, but rather, was ascribed to him by others who respected his Koreanness and maleness over Taylor's foreign (White)

¹¹³ This includes women from both Eastern and Western countries, as the migrant worker arena was largely dominated by women of East and South Asian descent. However, as Kim & Fu (2008) point out, the racialization of White/Western women sex workers held different meaning as their value was so entwined with not simply gendered domination, but a subversion of the "usual" Western dominance over the East.

womanhood. Once again, men's authority over their women partners is indicative of Confucian values (Deuchler, 1992), but race and nation play a role in this dynamic as well. Taylor's being a White American matters not only because of aforementioned associations between objectification and sex work, but also because of the contentious relationship between the United States and South Korea. The rise in anti-American sentiment since the 1980s (Kim, 2002), as well as the controversial occupation of Korea by the U.S. military, undoubtedly has some effect on how Americans are perceived. Because two thirds of my interviewees are from the U.S., the sociopolitical status of Americans in Korea is helpful for unpacking how these women navigate their roles as foreign residents. Additionally, because all but one of my interviewees are White, their race, rather than their nationality, is perhaps most salient when considering the ways in which they move about the world. That is, their citizenship may affect their visa status, but their racialized and gendered identities are visible indicators of their value to the national community.

A few of my interviewees recognized their racial privilege explicitly in our conversations, and anecdotally spoke to the inequitable treatment and hierarchization of foreigners. Even when roped into the same all-encompassing discursive category, there is no doubt that skin color dictates how one is treated. After describing numerous occurrences of restaurant employees and taxi drivers denying her service because they "don't accept foreigners," Lucy noted:

It's worse for people of color though, for sure. [I] haven't seen anything, just heard...they get their hair touched a lot and um, they're assumed to be from Africa, which to a lot of Koreans is assumed to be poor...they don't get accepted into places a bit more. They get touched more. They get stared at more.

Lucy's observation that those "assumed to be from Africa" were seen as "poor" was contrasted by a statement she made earlier in our conversation regarding her own experiences being stereotyped: "They think I'm rich. I'm from America, so I must be a rich white person from an

affluent [sic] family or something like that.” These simplifications point to the stark difference in the ways in which whiteness is valued in Korea; race is not simply a signifier of difference, but it is an indication of wealth and global power (Oh, 2019).

Brooke confessed that she had it “pretty easy there as a White foreigner,” and also alluded to the problematic notion of value. Discussing the issues she had making Korean friends, Brooke said:

I think some- sometimes it's like, people maybe have never met a foreigner before and they think it's cool....like they'll ask to take a picture with you right away when meeting you. Like they want to put it on their profile picture that they met a... a White person or something...it's also been awkward in some situations where it's been me and a Black friend and the Korean person will only want...they only want the picture with me.

Here, proximity to whiteness is constructed as a novel indication of status. “Traditionally, in Korean society, a lighter skin color symbolizes higher social status...whereas a darker skin tone discloses a life of manual and agricultural labor” (Kim & Fu, 2008, p. 507); the closer one is to whiteness, the greater chance one is of a higher class. But, drawing on Edward Said, Joon K. Kim and May Fu (2008) point out that “the social ascriptions associated with the concept of ‘whiteness’ could be attributed historically to hegemonic ideas about human progress based on racial types.” These ideas spread from the West, as the U.S. in particular rose as a global superpower by the twentieth century, and with it came “the idealized Western Woman” characterized by “imperial virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Kim & Fu, 2008, p. 509). Quickly mobilized by advertising, popular culture, and the beauty industry, whiteness was both embedded in notions of class distinction as well as constructed as a valuable commodity. Discourses surrounding the commodification of whiteness in Asia signify the “imperialist racialised value of superiority” (Goon & Craven, 2003), so associating with White foreigners can serve as a kind of social capital. However, it is important that these associations

are also temporary; by preserving the moment in a photograph, one is able to “possess” whiteness without necessarily accepting a foreigner as a fully assimilated member of Korean society.

As with other consumer cultures around the world, modern Korean society has continued to construct ideals of beauty and femininity dictated by market desires. Since the 1990s, Korean cosmetics companies have found success with a number of “whitening” skin products, as well as a more pervasive desire for protecting and preserving light skin (Hart, 1990; Kim & Fu, 2008). For the modern woman,¹¹⁴ the commodification of whiteness is also often paired with the desire for youth. While Confucian hierarchies required that one receive more respect as they age, older women in contemporary Korea face a barrage of advertising that emphasizes their lack of value. As Dennis Hart (1990) puts it, “Today aging does not equal a maturation of ability and wisdom, but a steady erosion of what advertising states is their basal point of social, marital and self importance; their youthful appearances” (p. 23). This is not simply a problem in Korea, of course, as the endless stream of beauty products promising to “fix” everything from wrinkles and cellulite to “excess” fat and undesirable skin tones is pervasive worldwide. In some sense, the women with whom I spoke already faced some degree of gender inequities at home, but Hannah did remark upon the differences she noticed:

In the U.S., if you’re a woman and like you choose not to wear makeup out of the house, like no one really cares? Whereas here there’s like, such a standard put on beauty and like, being skinny, being pretty, being beautiful...if you’re not...insanely skinny, people will tell you to your face that you’re fat.

Hannah explained that these standards in the U.S. were instead more “subliminal,” indicating that the expectations were more covert: a slew of advertisements and social comparison, perhaps,

¹¹⁴ Both in and outside of Korea; certainly the marketed desire for thinness, youth, sex appeal, etc. affects women worldwide.

but not being told as a “U.S. size eight, which I think is pretty standard, average” that she should “go to the gym.” While foreigners are perhaps at times held to different standards than Koreans, narratives of acceptable and/or preferable femininity undoubtedly shape the ways in which one can feel as though they can belong in Korea.

For foreign women, their value is also shaped by a visa system that privileges particular bodies over others. The long sought after F-2-7 visa, which provides foreigners with official “resident” status, is based on an ever-changing “points” system that grants people more points if they are younger; once one turns 35, their eligible points begin to drop. In terms of foreigners’ “value,” points are also added with higher income and education, making the F-2-7 visa out of reach for lower wage migrant workers, many of whom come from non-Western countries (Ock, 2020). As briefly mentioned in Chapter One, this merit-based system similarly exists in countries like Canada and is linked to the contributions an individual can make to the economy. However, as political scientist Erin Aeran Chung (2020) argues, the Korean visa system is also rooted in the institutionalization of noncitizen hierarchies along the lines of race and gender. While visa policies were initially enacted to account for Korea’s labor shortage, the “marriage migrant” visa, which one of my interviewees possessed, was created to account for Korea’s “bridal shortage” and stagnant birth rate. Although non-Korean women were granted numerous benefits of permanent residency, the marriage migrant visa also enhanced their vulnerability, as their residency was determined/controlled by their marital status, and insinuated that women’s worth was determined by their ability to produce and raise children, take care of aging in-laws, and assimilate to the best of their abilities (Chung, 2020). As such, foreign women’s value has long been derived - at least in part - from their potentials to reproduce and to conform to patriarchal

ideals, and this has especially been the case for non-White and/or non-Western women who continue to face additional racialized layers of discrimination.

In this section, I have discussed some of the complex sociocultural, political, and historical factors that shape these particular women's experiences as foreigners in South Korea. As an all-encompassing category of "Other," the word "foreigner" obfuscates the nuance of non-Korean migrants' lives, ignoring racialized hierarchies that not only hold "pure Koreanness" as superior, but that also privilege whiteness while denigrating anyone with darker skin. It is important that the nine women with whom I spoke do not face this latter prejudice; while their challenges with outsidership is legitimate and psychologically taxing, they cannot fully speak to the experiences of, for example, Iman - the Somali American hijabi YouTuber whose content I examine in previous chapters - or, perhaps even more socially distant, a lower-class marriage migrant from South Vietnam or the Philippines. That said, I do not want to dismiss my interviewees' experiences and struggles, as their realities as foreigners are not only valid, but can disrupt their sense of self and connection to community - a community which can at times be toxic, intrusive, and/or exclusionary. The next section continues my discussion of the alienation felt by foreigners in Korea by addressing intra-group surveillance by other foreigners. Some of my interviewees revealed the ways in which other foreigners living in Korea take on the role of "gatekeeper," judging others' legitimacy in regard to their foreign identity, residency in Korea, and even their online presence. I illustrate this discussion both through interview data and by introducing a case of online harassment that occurred between two creators whose content I analyze in the previous two chapters. While the Internet can be a space to temporarily escape negative experiences offline, it can also foster further feelings of exclusion.

Foreigners as “Gatekeepers” and the Judgment of Legitimacy

Although “foreigners” are not a homogenous community, at times their differences can result in dissonance and disruption as individuals clash over what it means - or what it *should* mean - to be a foreigner in South Korea. It is not only external narratives that clash with individuals’ identities as foreigners, but also monitoring and judgment by other non-Koreans (both online and offline). Especially for those who put pieces of their private lives online, foreigners can experience a variety of difficulties resulting from intra-group (e.g., other foreigners) surveillance, including exclusion, hierarchization, bullying, and harassment. This section addresses the behaviors of fellow foreigners as a final source of disruption in women’s attempts to determine for themselves how they understand their place in Korea and how they represent their lives online. In doing so, it contextualizes my final turn toward their persistent pursuit of content creation. By counteracting the numerous external narratives that shape and often stifle their identities and sense of belonging, foreign women can continue to reclaim their agency by carving out a creative, interactive, and transnational space for themselves and their audiences online.

Eva was glad that “the feedback has been positive” on her blog, especially since she worked to ensure that her “online persona” was largely optimistic. Specifically, in response to her posts about food and travel, commenters would share their own relevant recommendations, evidencing a cycle of support on her page. However, Eva also noted that when she was blogging about her time in Korea, it was difficult for her to find that supportive community among other foreigners. She did find some marginal success networking in a Facebook group for women living in Korea, but it was hard for her to find positive spaces in which to engage with others:

It was hard to find groups that are very active and like, have a large...community, but are also remaining positive. Like uh, the biggest mixed group of people living in Korea is

OINK. And that's... "Only in Korea," and that has a very, very bad reputation...a lot of very weird material...I think there are some like legitimate posts on there as well. Like, people wanting advice, help, and stuff like that. But there's also so much just...crapping on Korea and like, talking about like, weird incidents in the subway, that kind of stuff... It made me uncomfortable to the point where I left the group.

Although she did not go into detail about the posts in this particular group, her allusion to its toxicity touches on the practices of policing that emerge among foreigners. "There's a lot of foreigners here who gate keep," Lucy revealed, an issue that creates a hierarchy even among those who may share positions on the periphery of Korean society. Relating this "gatekeeping" to fellow English teachers she met who followed her on social media, Lucy elaborated,

Sometimes the hardest part about being in Korea is other foreigners. Sometimes they judge you more than Koreans do. It's like really...cliquey and hard sometimes here with other foreigners because they're the ones who are checking you regarding how much you like K-pop and popular culture. So many - that's why I didn't know so many of the people I was helping *did* like K-pop because they hid it. 'Cause they could tell, they could tell that like, "Oh I can't go to Korea liking K-pop. I have to have a legitimate reason. So, this is my legitimate reason."

This fight for legitimacy resonates with Schutze's (2013) discussion of the hierarchy of expertise in that those with more "real," lived experiential knowledge of Korea/n culture are viewed as more authentic or authoritative than those whose knowledge is gleaned from entertainment. Individuals whose online content focuses primarily on K-pop can be seen - especially by other foreigners who live and work in Korea - as perpetuating a limited view that does not reflect reality. That said, Whitney and Iman's less recent vlogs included many of their own K-pop fan experiences, showing themselves attending concerts and jumping for joy at the sight of celebrities. Their fangirling, however, does not delegitimize their presence in Korea in part because their Blackness already makes them hypervisible Others, and because they have access

to the K-pop industry that others do not. The handful of vlogs in my sample in which either/both women meet Korean celebrities warrant their belonging in Seoul.¹¹⁵

The creators I spoke with also distanced themselves from those whose content is overtly reliant upon their dating a Korean person. Taylor mentioned that she thought people would be “really surprised to see [that] a White female can date a Korean man and have a normal relationship,” since she observed “so many other YouTubers” exoticizing their relationships and using their Korean partners for content. This feeling was shared by Margaret, whose husband is also Korean. She noted that she has seen other “Western-Korean couples” make content focusing predominantly on their interracial relationship and did not “want to go down that road” and thought it was “just weird.” Once again, creators did not specify whose channels/brands specifically they were referencing here, but there are a decent number of YouTube channels that center interracial relationships in Korea, especially those between Korean men and non-Korean women. In addition to some national stigma surrounding interracial dating and marriage,¹¹⁶ when a Western woman’s online brand emphasizes her relationship with a Korean man, it can be read by audiences as mirroring the fetishization of Korean men by K-pop fans.

Despite the apparent stigmatization of integrating K-pop or Korean partners into one’s self-brand, White German YouTuber Farina Jo has leaned into her K-pop fanaticism (specifically

¹¹⁵ Farina Jo’s (discussed in this section) fangirling also does not negate her belonging when she travels to/stays in Korea because she has a German-Korean boyfriend of over five years. Their relationship serves as “proof” that she is not exoticizing Korea, but is instead possessive of some kind of “insider” knowledge simply based on the racial/ethnic identity of her partner.

¹¹⁶ As I’ve alluded to in this chapter, this social stigma is due to a number of compounding factors, namely the conflation of race, ethnicity, and nationality in Korea and the desire to protect and maintain the “essence” of Korean culture. There are also hierarchies associated with who is more acceptable both as a resident and as a partner to a Korean person. That is, those who are in closer proximity to whiteness and wealth (nationally or based on singular socioeconomic class) have traditionally been the most desirable. Yet, at the same time, the sexualization of White women also risks positioning them as temporary and/or disposable. Women from more “liberal” Western countries more generally may also be perceived as unable to assimilate to the standards of subservience set for Korean wives (see: Lim, 2010).

her obsession with BTS) *and* has frequently included her Korean¹¹⁷ boyfriend, Jongin, in most of her videos. With over 800K¹¹⁸ subscribers, whom she playfully refers to as her “jotatoes” and who are filmed at various events taking photos with her as if she is a celebrity,¹¹⁹ it appears as though these content choices do not affect her status. However, in a 2018 video titled “Comments I Get for Having an Asian Boyfriend,” Farina reveals that she has been called a “race traitor” and has been told to “find [her]self a ‘real man,’ because according to them, Asian men aren’t real men.” This latter comment reflects Orientalist stereotypes originating from the West that construct Asian masculinity as passive, inferior, and effeminate (Shek, 2007), an implication that Farina shrugs off in her video. But that simply featuring Dongin on her channel can result in racialized backlash indicates the policing by other non-Koreans that can occur easily (and anonymously) online.

Sharing personal details and being perceived as open, honest, and authentic - crucial practices for content creators, regardless of audience size or monetization status - always comes with risks (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Pruchniewska 2017). “While some bloggers experience informal content policing or mockery,” Duffy (2017) writes, “more insidious expressions of online misogyny include trolling, cyber-bullying, and doxing...it is precisely this bleeding together of one’s professional and personal spheres that makes social media creators vulnerable to expressions of online hate” (pp. 134-135). This has certainly been the case for the creators whose content I examine in Chapters Two and Three, as well as for my interviewees.

¹¹⁷ Jongin is ethnically/racially Korean, but his nationality (like Farina’s) is German.

¹¹⁸ In early 2021, Farina finally reached one million subscribers on YouTube. This perhaps puts her now in a different “tier” than when I originally began this project in 2019. However, because I had been analyzing her vlog content that was produced long before she reached this level of Internet hype, my arguments still stand.

¹¹⁹ Albeit, she is a model and was crowned Miss Germany in 2016, so she has previously been in the public eye. That said, her YouTube channel does not appear to be predominantly populated by anyone who knew her before, but instead, by fellow K-pop fans.

In the public/private sphere of social media, Taylor described how she vacillates between “feeling more open,” putting her “whole life out there” and feeling as though she “probably shouldn’t say anything.” While a number of creators told me that it was important to them to be able to not feel pressure to produce for the sake of production and/or profit, they were also acutely aware of the necessity to put themselves out there. YouTube videos or blog posts can be creative endeavors, but they still exist in a seeing-is-believing culture in which creators are expected to be open and vulnerable. Lucy captured this notion well when she characterized it as “receipt culture,” in which she was adamantly against participating. “I’ve occasionally gotten comments where people are like, ‘Hey, you’re too vague.’ Like, spill the tea,” Lucy reflected, “I do frustrate the people who want to be told how their experience is going to be here...they wanted like, more details, maybe... to feel that what I’m saying is not like... lying, I guess?” It can be irritating to be on the receiving end of frustration due to a refusal to share minute details of her experiences in Korea, but frustration can also mutate to anger and abuse. For Taylor, her online encounters with K-pop fans in particular quickly spiraled into her receiving “death threats” and being told to kill herself. Taylor also noted that she once created a video about a celebrity-level YouTuber that received mixed reactions:

It got a lot of positive reactions? But it got a lot of negative reactions and it actually went somewhat viral to where other YouTubers were making videos about my video. And so I was like, you know, that was an overwhelming amount of attention to go from like a couple thousand views to like, like 200,000 views in a video...it just spread like wildfire.

After this uptick in feedback from unintended audiences, Taylor privated this video and went through what she described as a “YouTube cleanse.” Similarly, Sofia also chose to remove herself from social media temporarily when she too faced the problems of virality:

A while ago I had a blog post that sort of went viral? But only in the expat community here. It’s mostly a clickbait post, because what I’m talking about there is my experiences...and it was completely taken out of context... and people then started

calling me like, racist and a fetishizer, and all of these like, really horrible, disgusting things. Like, I'm actually no longer on Facebook because of it. I guess the only way that I manage it is to just stay off of social media platforms that I consider like, more toxic.

The specific post Sofia alludes to here was about dating, an extremely common topic for bloggers/vloggers in Korea (and in general), but one that is difficult to tackle under the scrutiny of foreigners who may police what they perceive as exoticization. The backlash Sofia received was severe enough to result in a lawsuit:

Because my reputation was so badly damaged. Like, people were literally like, coming for me on all my social media channels and saying like, really nasty things to me and about me and talking about me, like, wherever they felt like it.

Ultimately, what constitutes a “good” reputation in the digital economy is not necessarily determined by one’s achievements, but by what is made valuable by institutions; that is, “reputation is a cultural product” (Hearn, 2010, p. 423). Not only is one’s reputation presumed to reflect their inherent value as an honest and transparent individual, but a good reputation is expected to pay off (Hearn, 2010). Sofia’s explicit desire to be honest and to be trusted by her audience as a friend indicates that she values reputation over fame or profit. Although her experience with defamation temporarily hampered her activities online, she alluded to the resilience that ultimately allowed her to return to doing what she loves, noting, “for right now the best thing to do is to focus on, you know, my mental health, and my physical health, and to sort of, I guess in a way like, rebrand.” Her intention to “rebrand,” rather than simply recover, highlights how her reputation is not just a social matter, but is shaped by market logic. Although returning to social media may result in further abuse, her ability to “rebrand” alludes to the power in self-surveillance; As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) argues of “brandability,” this “self-absorbed gaze is animated both by new digital technologies and by an increasing belief that visibility leads to a reimagined self-empowerment” (p. 78).

The value of reputation also emerged among creators whose content I analyze in the previous two chapters. While I was regularly checking in on these women's social media,¹²⁰ Rachel revealed that she faced a situation three years prior that was not only damaging to her reputation, but detrimental to her safety. On September 1, 2020, Rachel posted a TikTok¹²¹ (@rachelheheh), which was later reposted to her IG Story, that explained this situation. Each short cut scene featured Rachel recreating her reactions, as text overlay explained each stage of the story. The text reads that she was happily making YouTube videos about her life in Korea, when a friend told her that someone was posting information about her on reddit. In a scene of Rachel on the subway, looking horrified, the text reads: "friend texts back saying someone has been stalking me, my bf and close friends online compiling photos + personal info spreading crazy false rumors." Although she had very few followers on her social media at the time, this repeated stalking led her to remove herself from YouTube, only to find that the anonymous individual reuploaded her deleted videos.

This more detailed TikTok was posted the day after Rachel's previous post¹²² that explicitly mentioned that the individual in question was "a popular YouTuber in Korea that I've never even met" and shared screenshots of this YouTuber (months later) admitting her involvement and apologizing. It was publicly revealed shortly thereafter that the YouTuber in question was Cari. Although she had privately apologized to Rachel, and Rachel (publicly)

¹²⁰ Even after capping my video sample in late 2019, I followed all the creators whose content and experiences I discuss in this dissertation on Instagram, in part to stay up-to-date on their lives and to offer a gesture of further transparency, particularly for the women I interviewed. Although my own Instagram profile is private, if creators requested to follow me back, I accepted. To this day, my interviewees and I at times exchange "likes," reactions, or brief DMs via IG Stories.

¹²¹ The TikTok features "I am at ur moms house" (Elizabeth Chetwyd), audio which has been used by others for various "storytime" videos. Based on my initial observations of others' use of the audio clip, the only consistency in these TikToks is their style and editing (not genre).

¹²² This TikTok features La Roux's "Bulletproof," indicating the resilience Rachel was able to hone after these instances. The text overlay here complements this, stating "You think you can hurt me?"

forgave her, this rehashing of the story of cyberbullying - which likely attributed to Rachel's minimal YouTube presence/popularity - prompted Cari to make a public apology video on her own channel. The video ("an overdue apology"), published on September 4, 2020, featured Cari, sitting on her couch and visibly upset, speaking directly to her subscribers and fanbase. She let them know what was going on, that she did not expect forgiveness (but thanked Rachel for being so gracious), and explained that she had been going to therapy in the years since. Responding to this being rather out of character for Cari's content, some of her followers expressed their loyalty and understanding, while others reflected that they needed to reevaluate their relationship with public figures.

After this event, Cari's authenticity was called into question on "Guru Gossip," an anonymous forum and YouTube rumor mill. "To me, Cari seemed beyond sweet and kind, and incapable of hurting a fly," one commenter posted, while another responded, "I can't see her the same way because I think everything is a lie now. Can't believe she didn't lose more subs." While the gossip site on which Cari initially doxxed Rachel ("Pretty Ugly Little Liars") is no longer publicly accessible, the comments on Guru Gossip mirror those on Cari's apology video, highlighting the value of creators who are legibly authentic and truthful. Despite the ubiquity of the term "influencer" for individuals who create content on social media, influence is not unidirectional. Rather, both audiences (and other creators) constrain the extent to which creators can maintain their reputations.

When Lucy's followers demand that she "spill the tea," or when strangers continue to pester creators to provide information, transparency becomes conflated with authenticity. An individual creator can secure both (positive) attention and visibility on social media by not only being "real," but by consistently relying on intimacy as currency (Raun, 2018). However, there is

a difference between fostering an intimate relationship with followers/fans, and exchanging privacy¹²³ for attention or loyalty. To balance transparency and reputation (both theirs and others'), creators must constantly perform affective labor, which Tobias Raun (2018) has argued is "an essential part of their trustworthiness and authenticity" (p. 108). Affective labor is so normalized in the digital economy that we hardly consider it "work" in the colloquial sense. Yet the need to practice vulnerability, transparency, genuine connection with others, and to maintain (or attempt to recover) a pristine reputation is particularly taxing for women, whose entrepreneurialism is already scrutinized as inferior and whose just being online too often leads to abuse.

Instances of harassment, surveillance, and cyberbullying disrupt the sense of security and self-assurance that can be cultivated by controlling one's personal narrative online. For foreign women in Korea, the worst offenders are not simply anonymous users criticizing their being in/talking about Korea, nor are they the "crazy" K-pop fans who Taylor mentioned have sent her "death threats." Rather, similar to the case of Cari and Rachel, the policing of creators' lives by other foreigners appears to be a looming threat. Taylor has met a number of other YouTubers while in Korea, but she was quick to say that "I don't get along with many of them." When prompted to consider why she felt this way, she said,

I don't know, actually. A lot of them are very, um...the YouTube community is surprisingly cutthroat in Korea. Like people will use you for views, people will use you

¹²³ Part of the issue here is conceptual clarity in regard to privacy versus secrecy. Because the rise of the "micro-celebrity" was so rapid - where ordinary people become "Internet famous" seemingly overnight - we, as audiences, are still more accustomed to our relationship with *actual* celebrities. Celebrity gossip magazines and online forums fueled the expectations of audiences to have insight into every detail of celebrities' lives, and there is a kind of ownership we feel over these individuals who have in some sense become commodities themselves. There is not time/space within this dissertation to pull apart the intricacies of celebrity studies, but it is important to consider how our expectations of the privacy of any public figure is shaped by the entertainment industry's commodification of stardom.

very easily and shamelessly...to get more views and get more subscribers? And I never really liked that.¹²⁴

That the YouTube community is “cutthroat” speaks to the insidious side of neoliberalism in the social media entertainment industry. While entrepreneurial aspirations can fuel success, individuals who subscribe to the myth of meritocracy and pursue competition over community-building can easily damage the reputation of others in their wake.

There is a lot working against women who create content on social media about their lives in South Korea. From audience misconceptions to the toxicity and judgment of fellow non-Koreans, it is sometimes puzzling to think about why one would continue to put their personal lives online, particularly when there is no obvious incentive. But social media platforms are not just spaces of co-optation, commodification, and criticism; they are tools for pleasure, playing with identity and culture, social connection, and communicating across difference. In the final section, I turn back toward my interviewees’ experiences with online content creation to argue that by being able to curate a public self-image and tell their own stories, these women can have more control over how they are perceived.

Creating Content and Controlling the Narrative

“I don’t agree with the concept that ‘Oh, you put it on the Internet, so you subjected yourself to this.’ I’m like, I live. Do I subject myself to things cause I live and exist? No, this is my home, my channel.”

(Interview with Lucy, November 5, 2019)

As they navigate life abroad, foreign content creators must constantly grapple with competing narratives. Mainstream media’s portrayal of non-Korean women clashes with user-generated media that, as creators mentioned in our interviews, had the potential to overlook

¹²⁴ It should also be noted that Taylor was referring explicitly to the “foreigner” YouTube community here. Of local Korean YouTubers, Taylor said they were “more welcoming than anybody.”

certain perspectives, overgeneralize, or, more worryingly, exoticize life in Korea. These women's identities and sense of self were also challenged through their interactions with a national culture still influenced by traditional Confucian values and grounded in state-led multiculturalism. These efforts arguably just scratch the surface of inclusivity, and are entangled in a contemporary consumerist culture that creates further standards to which women in particular are expected to conform. Finally, the publicness of creators' personal blogs and social media open them up to questioning, critique, and pushback by readers/viewers with whom they would otherwise have no connection. They are upheld as experts by proximity to Korea/n culture by some, while their legitimacy is scrutinized and policed by others. However, as Lucy alluded to in the quote at the beginning of this section, one's social media can be not only a place to create, but a place to protect and to re-establish a sense of control. In this section, I consider how creators alluded to having ownership over their social media production and how the processes of making (not just telling) stories can fulfill personal, social, and/or emotional needs.

Social media are public spaces, but as law scholar Karen McCullagh (2008) has found, that does not mean that creators do not value privacy or that they have no agency over their online presence. By viewing her YouTube channel as her "home," Lucy constructs the very public platform as a place where she expects to have control over how she expresses herself, protects her identity, and decides who is allowed to be invited in.¹²⁵ This is indicative of the notion of "expressive privacy"^{126 127} which "concerns an individual's ability to freely choose,

¹²⁵ In this case, she said that those she invited in were those who "need something like advice or guidance or just information, or just vibe with me."

¹²⁶ see: DeCew, J. (1997) *In Pursuit of Privacy: Law, Ethics, and the Rise of Technology*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 61.

¹²⁷ McCullagh's (2008) discussion of privacy in relation to blogging employs DeCew's cluster concept of privacy, which includes expressive privacy in addition to information privacy (*control over one's personal information*) and accessibility privacy (*dictating who has access to the individual and to what extent*). These other prongs of the privacy framework are also relevant in Lucy's description of her channel as a "house," as McCullagh's examples of an infringement of privacy rights explicitly engage with acts such as a home being wiretapped.

act, self-express and socially interact...[and] is integral to protecting individual autonomy” (McCullagh, 2008, p. 5). Being under constant social scrutiny creates pressure to conform to societal norms, a less than ideal circumstance for women whose outsider status already makes fitting in unrealistic. Elena alluded to this when she pointed out that life in Korea is not easy “when you’re actually here, like, *seriously* living.” “It’s very easy to get lonely here in Korea, especially as a foreigner,” she said, mentioning the social pressure to date and have a family, “Korea’s very good at making you *think* you want that.”

Due to the compounding pressures of obtaining a particular lifestyle while also navigating one’s identity as a foreign woman, I asked Elena whether she felt going on social media was beneficial at all. “I think it does help me a lot,” she said, not necessarily because she was seeking out specific “support communities,” but that “me just writing about everything” and using it as a “more positive retrospective [process], that helps me a lot.” Despite the publicness of online platforms, it is the creator who chooses what, when, and how much to share, as well as with whom they interact. The formation of meaningful relationships is one of the most important aspects of expressive privacy (McCullagh, 2008), so for foreign women in Korea, sharing their personal experiences while maintaining control of their own narratives helps regulate social interaction and strengthen community online, even when they are not explicitly seeking it out. As such, their production corrects for the objectification, subordination, and outsiderhood that shapes their everyday realities.

Content creation emerged as a way to process experiences and to make stories. “I got really creative and I just stopped, like, caring about what people thought of me,” Brooke confessed to me as we conversed about her trajectory of making YouTube videos. In this statement, her creativity overrode her concern over her image and what others might think.

Instead, making videos was a process of carefully crafting a story. “It’s like I’m organizing the chaos,” she remarked, noting that her “hobby” brought her joy so long as she detached herself from potential critique. “Organizing the chaos” can also be empowering. When I asked her about how she chose what to put online, Brooke told me a story about her vlogging a trip to the mountains, during which “some guy in a line...yelled out to me and told me, ‘hey Fatty, you should pay double for the cable car ‘cause you’re so fat!’” and was discouraged when others laughed, rather than coming to her defense.¹²⁸ Because she recorded this interaction, she was faced with the choice of whether to include it in the final edit of her vlog, but worried about how others might use it to make generalizations about Korea. Brooke’s encounter was uncomfortable and isolating, but when it came to creating a vlog about her day, she was ultimately in control of whether this negative interaction was to even appear at all.

In discussing her desire to always be honest on her YouTube channel and share the hardships of being in Korea, Taylor mentioned in passing that she started seeing a therapist. She admitted that she uses “humor to cope with it,” but that “in the moment it was really stressful and traumatic for me.” Although she did not go into detail about what “it” was, this too alludes to the ways in which control over one’s personal narrative can be a way to manage and make sense of one’s experiences and identity. Clinical psychologists James W. Pennebaker and Janel D. Seagal (1999) argue that forming stories about personal experiences can be extremely beneficial for one’s physical and mental health, stating that the process,

allows one to organize and remember events in a coherent fashion while integrating thoughts and feelings. In essence, this gives individuals a sense of predictability and control over their lives. Once an experience has structure and meaning, it would follow that the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable. Constructing stories

¹²⁸ In reflecting upon this event, Brooke was also careful to say that “generally speaking, they’re [Koreans] more blunt about body size,” noting that it was “not considered rude” and can also be viewed as a norm of the “older generation.” Even so, her ability to distance herself from the hurtful comments in retrospect also demonstrates the power she can have in the curation of memories and experiences via creating something new.

facilitates a sense of resolution, which results in less rumination and eventually allows disturbing experiences to subside gradually from conscious thought. Painful events that are not structured into a narrative format may contribute to the continued experience of negative thoughts and feelings (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1243).

While it would be a stretch to say that simply being a foreigner in Korea is “traumatic,” the recurring challenges of being reminded that you do not (and will not ever) belong, can cause unique stressors. While not all of the content creators with whom I spoke were *writing* about their experiences per se, the creation of a YouTube vlog¹²⁹ is a similar externalized processing of “organizing the chaos,” of giving more structure and meaning to alleviate emotional turmoil. A vlog is a creative representation of how the creator sees the world, and how they want their world to be seen by their audience. The inclusion of music, the addition of text or image overlays, and the ways in which clips are stitched together add expressive texture to otherwise mundane videos, and as such, creating content - even that which is public - is an opportunity to translate and/or transform one’s situated version of reality.

Creators also leverage social media as a way to connect with other foreigners both in and outside of Korea with whom they could establish real friendships. “In an ideal world,” Pennebaker (2000) writes, “upsetting experiences are transformed into stories that are shared with others...Such storytelling ultimately helps us maintain a stable social and emotional life” (p. 15). For my interviewees, these “others” can be their imagined distant audiences, as well as other foreigners who they may be able to meet in person. Although creators mentioned that their content was to some extent, audience-oriented (e.g., Margaret’s comment that her content was not about herself), centering one’s experiences as evidence *is* inherently centering one’s self, and

¹²⁹ Although not fully backed by clinical research, Pennebaker & Seagal (1999) do suggest that if self-expression is integral to the value of writing, then other nonverbal means of self-expression (dance, music, art) can also be therapeutic (p. 1247). Additionally, “vlogging” is, of course, a derivative of “blogging” and shares qualities of self-making and storytelling, but using different modes.

does not negate the social and interpersonal aspects of content creation. Sharing one's experiences as evidence can help others navigate their own future encounters in Korea, but it can just as likely help creators process their turmoil as well.

In the context of therapeutic emotional processing, keeping a journal "may facilitate the process of forming a narrative about...experiences, as well as reinforce progress, and support the change of maladaptive behaviors" (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1251). Relatedly, some of the creators with whom I spoke discussed their online content as being diary-like. Sofia noted that, especially when she first began writing about her "misadventures in Japan," that "it basically was just an online diary" not necessarily intended for a wide audience. After reiterating that her YouTube videos can only capture her individual experience, rather than representing some universal narrative, Elena also remarked that she likes to "kind of think of it as my own diary." As a gendered form of writing, diaries have long facilitated women's self-expression.

Notably, as women were relegated to the private sphere of home and family, diary writing served in part as a way of keeping genealogical and historical records (Begos, 1987). Viewed in light of these history-making potentials of diary writing, foreigners' online diaries can be understood as contributing alternative perspectives to dominant discourse; they are digital records of both exterior and interior worlds. Diaries are tools for recording and reflection, "offering a glimpse into the social and emotional world inhabited by the diarist" while providing "narrative continuity" and "enabling the diarist to retain possession and control of the self, allowing for continuous self-construction...Diaries provide a means of writing ourselves into the world, to enter history through the social and private domains." (Ibrahim, 2020, pp. 333-334). While there are significant material differences between handwritten diaries and digital media, they are all on the continuum of artefacts for "accounting the self," (re)making the everyday and,

specifically for social media, “enacting human agency, creativity, affective labour and social relations” (Ibrahim, 2020). Diaries capture particular moments in time, reveal inner thoughts and feelings, and serve as a kind of extension of memory, which contributes to the processes of self-making.

In addition to “organizing the chaos,” Brooke remarked that she created YouTube videos largely as a way to make memories. “I just realized like I really enjoy just doing this as a way to organize my own memories in like - sort of like a digital scrapbook,” she said, noting that she occasionally went back to re-watch her own videos “just for fun to remember when I went somewhere.” Like social media more generally, scrapbooks are personal collections of meaningful items and “deeply social texts” (Good, 2012, p. 558). Although scrapbooking is often a private hobby, it is also a mode of social performance in which individuals can express their attitudes and tastes (Good, 2012). In their discussion of aesthetics and curation on Tumblr, Sumin Zhao & Michele Zappavigna (2018) characterize digital scrapbooks as a private form of self-expression that “amplif[ies] subjective experience and create[s] a curatorial self, a subject that is constantly being curated and curating” (p. 17). The curatorial self, they argue, is rooted in the “aesthetics of the everyday,” a concept which amplifies our viewing of mundane and ordinary objects and experiences (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018).¹³⁰ By viewing her content as a scrapbook, Brooke can not only curate glimpses of her everyday life, but makes it accessible to others. Making YouTube videos “for the memories” rather than for a monetary incentive, Brooke said, allows her to help other foreigners.

When I asked Lucy about who she envisioned watching her videos, she said, “I want to attract people who think like me. I want to attract the community - not *exactly* like me, but I want

¹³⁰ And a concept that is implicitly related to Chapter Three’s discussion of Saito’s work on everyday aesthetics.

to attract people who feel what I'm putting out there." Resisting the capitalist imperative to reach the largest possible number of viewers, Lucy expresses her desire to "attract" only those who can connect with her on a more emotional and/or personal level. The notion of attraction speaks to the ways in which content creation can be understood as "affective practice," or how emotions and the body are incorporated in collective meaning-making (Wetherell, 2012). That is, when Lucy publishes a YouTube video or posts on Instagram, she presents herself in a way that she hopes will attract viewers she might get along with as friends. Her content - or anyone's lifestyle content - is not purely a presentation of self, but it is also a presentation of an environment, an atmosphere, a set of emotions that might be evoked in an audience. When we discussed her plans for the future, Elena said she wanted to make videos that were similar to what she was already making, but that she wanted to make them "better" by "mak[ing] sure that I engage more with the audience, I share a bit more, and I make it also like, aesthetically a bit more pleasing by like, you know, playing more with the shots, with the ideas." Notably, none of these strategies to improve her content were related to popularity or profit. Instead, Elena was concerned with doing more to cultivate relationships with her audience and to satisfy what she called "the more artistic part of me."

Especially for micro-creators, making art and making stories about one's life online goes beyond that which can be commodified. Whether blogs and their video counterparts are thought of as diaries, journals, or scrapbooks, their publicness aids in their potential to build a community narrative that works against stories told by the media, audiences, and the state. That is, while foreigners in Korea may just as well process their emotions in a private space, doing so publicly can foster community solidarity; it is not just these nine individuals who have had to navigate the scripts which have been written for them, but a significant number of "foreign" women have

likely faced a similar burden.¹³¹ As I have detailed throughout this dissertation, there are so many structural factors working against content creators as they exist in multiple spaces in which their value can be derived from their marketability. Nevertheless, by producing content rooted in personal experience, often with the community-centered goal of helping others, women in Korea can control their own narrative, speaking back to the numerous prescriptions of what it means to be a foreigner in Korea, and reclaiming a sense of agency.

¹³¹ Based on their own encounters with commenters/audiences/other creators, as well as my numerous long-term observations of YouTube videos by other foreign women in Korea and my own firsthand experiences/observations abroad.

Conclusion

I made the decision to go to graduate school after reading Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* in an undergraduate course on Asian film. I was still deep in my admiration for Korean popular culture and so far into studying Korean that my instructor was teaching us the proper stroke order for writing Chinese characters. But until that point, I had never been exposed to the complex and wounding history of the relationship between the dichotomous East and West. "The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West)," Said writes,

as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles...The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions (Said, 1978, pp. 9-10).

It is through the eyes of "experts" that knowledge of Otherness becomes institutionalized, normalized, embedded within the national imaginary until its origins are obscured. As a White woman entering graduate school, studying discourse of race and culture, it is not lost on me that I am inherently part of this lineage of academic "expertise."

Underlying - yet still largely untouched by - this dissertation is a conversation surrounding colonialism and the production of knowledge. Although I have demonstrated the benefits of content creation insofar as it can counteract pressures to commodify life, culture, and interpersonal connection, the women who are at the center of my research are from Western countries and are always producing knowledge about Korea/n culture. By documenting their successful navigation of Korea, their content has the potential to empower viewers who may be weary of traveling abroad, as well as establish the creator herself as an empowered solo woman

traveler. But creators whose brands rely on their real lives as foreigners cannot escape the colonial undertones that their presence holds.

As with other world travel bloggers, the content creators in my study present themselves as “cultural mediators who can bridge differences” and promote cultural understanding through their use of online platforms (Molz, 2005). By neither deemphasizing nor exoticizing difference, their depictions of their time spent in Korea bring audiences closer to the nation and culture through experiences of the everyday. At the same time, their acts of claiming space (and the ways in which their social media reinforces those claims) are reminiscent of the recurrent occupation of Korea by outsiders. Defining the nation often depends upon a contrast to and protection from the outside, the foreign, the spaces which are distinguishable from the domestic (Kaplan, 1998). But when domestic spaces are primary sites at which foreigners take on a role of host and tour guide, they become authoritative figures for their audiences, regardless of their desires to be viewed as ordinary.

The collective of creators in Korea who are from North America and Europe, whose content is predominantly in English, and whose target audiences are often other foreigners also perpetuate the dominant influence of the West on “global” culture. When non-Koreans create public content about Korea for hundreds of thousands of people, they are - inadvertently or otherwise - teaching people about a country and culture to which they are still outsiders. It is not as though their depictions are not as “authentic” as if they were produced by a Korean creator; these types of judgment claims about authenticity ultimately get us nowhere. But it is important to recognize that non-Korean content creators’ media productions contribute to the West’s continued role in global knowledge production and dissemination. By publicly negotiating their foreign identities and depicting their everyday routines, these individuals become “experts” who

transmit knowledge about what it is *really* like to live in Korea, even if they simply desire to belong. Context collapse - the flattening of multiple audiences into one (Marwick & Baym, 2011) - makes it difficult to disentangle intentions from impact; as some of my interviewees pointed out, being on social media often has unintended consequences.

Social media has given us immediate and unfettered access to “otherness.” Reddit allows for the anonymous exchange of information, recommendations, and memes from great distances; Twitter amplifies an endless stream of voices ranging across the political spectrum and has allowed social movements to thrive; YouTube often feels like an infinite void of different perspectives, languages, genres, and modes of communication. With the world at our fingertips, on our desks, and in our pockets, it is easy to conflate the *potential* to accumulate knowledge with actually doing so. When we learn about life in another country by consuming media, we should also ask: Whose perspectives are being shared, and whose are left out? To what extent does the representation of difference gloss over nuance? In whose interest do these representations work? When content is created and circulated in digital spaces that are fueled largely by advertisers (i.e., YouTube), it can be artistic, self-expressive, and empowering while at the same time contributing to the burgeoning power of U.S.-based platforms.

It is crucial to consider social media from a structural perspective; it is not just individual users exchanging information, but we are embedded in a global media system that is dominated by Western power and American commercial interests. As I have mentioned, content creators who want their social media to impact as many interested parties as possible are limited in their choices of how and where to produce content; the platforms with the widest global reach are those owned and operated by U.S. companies. Dal Yong Jin (2013; 2017) maintains that the U.S.’s ownership of key platforms around the world (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, etc.) has resulted

in asymmetrical power relations or “platform imperialism.” Not only do U.S.-based platforms have greater commercial value than local platforms that target domestic users, but they have greater cultural value as well (Jin, 2017); regardless of their country of origin, video makers who want to reach an audience will use YouTube.

Platform imperialism should be concerning for a number of reasons, namely that “the global penetration of U.S. platforms signals the increasing role of the United States in all cultural areas, including production, distribution, and consumption” (Jin, 2017, p. 227). With its grip on the digital infrastructure, the American tech industry both accumulates capital and spreads particular values that are inscribed into the corporate ecosystem. Specifically, American platforms are built around an implicit “libertarian set of values” that emphasizes individual over collective concerns, resulting in a clash between private interests and public values (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 27). Without attempting to more collaboratively envision the values embedded in the platform society, American ideology will continue to reign at the center of digital culture.

Being from the U.S. means that I often take for granted the ways in which I benefit from my country’s economic, political, and cultural dominance. In my lifetime of Internet use, I have never faced censorship by the government or been limited in how I can express myself online. My total inability to have deep conversations in any language but English is, in my eyes, a disadvantage, but has rarely been an issue in any country I have visited. As I was finalizing my program of study as an undergraduate, I remember sitting in my academic advisor’s office, asking for advice on my career path, post-graduation. The only response she could give me was to teach English in Korea. I have a number of close friends who have spent time teaching English in other countries as a way to make money and to experience another culture fresh out of college. But not only did I have no interest in teaching children, I was uncomfortable with the thought of

teaching English in Korea. I felt that I had learned so much about other cultures through the study of language, why would I want to be an active participant in reinforcing that the world should really be learning *my* language? I do not want to discredit the hard work, dedication, and good intentions of foreign English teachers in Korea. However, since the Korean government's globalization efforts of the 1980s, and in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, English was increasingly viewed as the key to gaining a competitive edge (Choi, 2021; Piller & Cho, 2013). English became a much sought-after commodity to be obtained at any cost, and as such, inequity inevitably grew; families who could afford to send their children to private after-school English programs were guaranteed to get ahead (Choi, 2021).

As with the English language, many U.S.-based online platforms are growing to be - if they have not become already - the default tools for global communication. Whether someone is denied access to knowledge or connectivity based on their lack of English ability or by not having a Facebook or Twitter, the proliferation of Western norms, values, tools, and technologies inevitably leaves people behind. While transnational content creation can produce artistic visions of everyday realities, connect people across difference, and expose us to others' perspectives, it also often implicitly carries with it the continued dominance of Western power. Of course, when we have a common language or a shared use of social media, we are better able to communicate and hopefully, to understand one another. But despite the seeming inevitability of U.S. corporations to continue to accumulate wealth, power, and global influence, it is important to recognize the historical weight this carries, and to seek out ways in which we might resist succumbing to increased pressures to commodify every aspect of our lives. In a world that rewards us for our neoliberal subjectivity as both constant consumers and competitive entrepreneurs, we must work to find - and revel in - moments of creativity, ordinariness, and

emotion. The connections we make across borders and through social media are not valuable because they are profitable or enhance our chances at success, but because they allow us to feel like we belong.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Creator Vignettes

“Hey guys, it’s me Whitney!”

Instagram Bio: basically a real life cartoon 🐼

YouTube Channel Description: Vlogs that are fun! About me:

I’m American. Living in South Korea. I have a channel in Korean called whitneybae. And that’s it.¹³²

Whitney, or “whitneybae,” is a twenty-something Black American from the Midwest whose bright and bubbly personality is integral to her success. Beginning with a vibrant colorful animation, her vlogs always open with a song by Jessi, a Korean/American solo hip hop artist.¹³³ With over one million subscribers on her primary YouTube channel, she is recognizably one of the most Internet-famous individuals making videos in and about her experiences in South Korea. While she does everything from spicy noodle challenges to outrageous makeup trends on her main channel, her vlog channel is a more toned-down look into her daily life in Seoul, albeit her being a micro-celebrity of sorts means that her daily life sometimes consists of professional modeling photo shoots and backstage access to K-pop shows.

“Hey guys, what’s up~”

Instagram Bio: 📍 Germany ↔ Korea 🇰🇷

🏠 YouTuber | 645k+ Fam 📺 #jotatoes

Do what you love, love what you do 🐼

YouTube Channel Description: ♀ •••? I’m Farina, born and raised in Germany, traveling the world and spreading happiness along the way!

Farina Jo is a white, German woman in her twenties, with stereotypically model-esque looks and an equally model-esque Korean-German boyfriend, Dongin. She wears her platinum blond hair in a relatively short bob and is a self-proclaimed BTS fanatic, which means that a lot of her content features her (and her boyfriend) at least mentioning - if not attending the concerts of - K-

¹³² I have begun each creator’s short description with (1) an introductory phrase they often say at the beginning of their videos, (2) their Instagram bio, and (3) a section of their YouTube channel description. This is all to preface my own introduction of the creator with how they have briefly framed themselves in their primary digital/social media profiles. It should be noted that these were all captured and documented in June 2020. Though there is a possibility that these will change in the near future, I maintain that it is apt to capture the way things are prior to the point of any “re-branding” or deletion as these creators lives and work transforms over time, as these details match up with the video data I analyze throughout my work here.

¹³³ In 2019, Jessi signed on with PSY’s record label, P-Nation. This artist mashup in and of itself speaks to the relevance of the reciprocal flows between East and West. Whitney, an American in South Korea, represents herself with music by an artist who capitalizes on (and makes her own) Black hip hop culture (and AAVE, which has been called out and critiqued by many) whose national heritage is mixed. Additionally, through her contract, Jessi aligns herself with PSY, who became a global sensation thanks to the YouTube virality of “Gangnam Style” in 2012. Despite racial and/or national affiliation and experiences, all of these individuals cannot firmly be put into one singular, stable category of identity.

pop idols and the entertainment industry. Although Farina does not live in Korea, many of her vlog-style videos depict her trips there in which she often plays an “expert” role by providing date ideas or giving advice on places to visit. Her being so invested in the international K-pop community and her having a handsome Korean boyfriend also means that her channel relies heavily on Korea/n culture for its success. She lovingly calls her fans the “jotatoes,” and many of her vlogs - specifically vlogs at concerts or events - feature shots of her chatting and taking selfies with the jotatoes.

“Hi guys, it’s Cari..”

Instagram Bio: 🍄 ephemeral 📱 seoul

YouTube Channel Description: Hi! I'm Cari and I am currently living in Seoul, Korea. I vlog about my daily life, my travels, what books I'm reading, what clothes I'm thrifting, and more! I try to balance tips for living or traveling in Korea, with just everyday life adventures :)

Cari is in her late twenties, a white woman from California now living in the center of Seoul. She first came to Korea by way of an internship with YG Entertainment, although she was/is by no means a K-pop super-fan, but transitioned to working in social media with a small female-owned company. Now, she creates online content full time, while her husband (a Korean citizen), Kurt, works in the IT industry. Much of Cari’s content is what viewers often deem (however vaguely) as “aesthetic”; she includes many shots of coffee, cakes, books, and art, and much of her time in vlogs is spent in cafes, in empty alleyways, and in beautiful outdoor spaces, surrounded by trees and flowers. Often complemented by acoustic indie tunes, her videos focus on solo travel and her favorite secret spots in Korea, communicating a kind of slower, bohemian style of living that captures the gentler side of urbanity.

“Hello~ and welcome back to another video”

Instagram Bio: One with the wildflowers 🌻

YouTube Channel Description: WELCOME! 🇰🇷 I'm Kali and I attend university in Seoul, South Korea. and I hope you'll follow along with me on this journey~~

Also communicating a kind of soft aesthetic, Kali is an early twenties mixed-race creator from the U.S. whose videos are primarily “lifestyle” based. Her voice is often calm and as she narrates in vlogs, she makes sure to decorate her videos with digitally rendered text adding side commentary that complements her daily life. Her presence rarely feels rehearsed, as if she has just picked up her camera and started filming; her videos often convey a sense of being very down-to-earth. She provides tips and tricks for her viewers on how she straightens her long, darkhair, her morning and exercise routines, and her study habits. Though she is a beginner at speaking Korean, her processes of learning both the language and the college culture abroad - as she initially traveled to Seoul as a university exchange student - are integral to her videos. She

provides not only insight into her day-to-day living, but also includes many details that have the potential to help viewers easily live out their dreams of going to Korea.

“Hey guys~ welcome back to my channel!”

Instagram Bio: so usSomali-American in KoreaKR| #미네소타/MinneSNOWta 🇸🇴 ❄️

YouTube Channel Description: Iman. Somali. Living in Seoul, South Korea!

Iman is a Black Somali-American woman from Minnesota in her late twenties/early thirties. Her YouTube content explicitly engages with her Muslim identity, as her channel title reads “Hijabi in Seoul City.”¹³⁴ Her makeup is always expertly done, her eyeshadow and lipstick extenuating her naturally pretty face. The hijab she wears changes from video to video, complimenting her outfit, and almost always remarked upon (enthusiastically) somewhere in the comment section. She smiles brightly when she speaks to the camera to introduce her videos which usually showcase some aspects of her life that are either poignant and out of the ordinary - such as fashion week vlogs or K-pop concerts - or that are mini-tours of guesthouses, restaurants, and public spaces. Quite clearly sociable, Iman is often with friends sharing food, chats, and laughter, and she always acknowledges the “presence” of her viewers, ensuring that they are given the opportunity to connect with her, often through a presumed shared experience with and/or interest in Islamic culture and how it translates to Korea.

“Hi~ it’s Rachel, and..”

Instagram Bio: US KR A girl and her pup in Seoul 🐕

YouTube Channel Description: Lifestyle blog, fashion, cosmetics, reviews, cafes, music and more. Please like and subscribe!

Last, but not least, Rachel is a white, twenty-something also from the United States whose work is quirky, to say the least. She has a soft, high-pitched and sometimes sarcastic tone in her videos, and often utilizes editing techniques that insert silly cartoon graphics or a fisheye lens that distorts her face. She and her twin sister, Natalie, (who does not live in Korea) co-own a jewelry brand called Twice Shy, which they describe on their website as a “unique international brand that is a direct reflection of our own personal styles.” Rachel is undoubtedly fashion-focused, and she is rarely seen in her videos without wearing creative outfits or Twice Shy jewelry. Her dog, a Shiba Inu named Mickey, is the co-star of her online content, and his picture - edited to add pink wings and a golden halo, of course - is displayed prominently on her YouTube channel banner. Like many native English speakers, she has been an elementary school English teacher during her time in Seoul, but her digital creations focus much more on fashion, lifestyle, storytelling, and tips for what to see, where to go, and what to wear in Korea.

¹³⁴ Iman’s original channel title - based on YouTube’s associated URL - was “TheKPOPaddict24,” indicating that there was some kind of intentional switch in personal brand as her focus became less on defining herself through her fan identity, and more so emphasizing her racial/ethnic/religious identity.

Appendix B: YouTube Video Sample

1. cari cakes. (2018 September 4). \$500 Korean Apartment Tour | Daegu, Korea [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBe69IAagBc>
2. cari cakes. (2016 October 11). \$400 Korean Apartment Tour | Seoul, Gangnam [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6QIFqX7OSQ>
3. cari cakes. (2018 March 10). How to Survive Long Haul Flights | Flying Seoul to LAX on Singapore Airlines [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3p5Oeik3EI>
4. cari cakes. (2019 August 31). Living My Studio Ghibli Dreams in Yufuin, Japan VLOG | ゆふいんの森 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RF0q0hJIN58>
5. cari cakes. (2019 July 6). lil self care vlog | getting a korean perm + haircut then thrifting! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSeQZARi5Z8>
6. cari cakes. (2017 December 20). Winter in Seoul | What To Wear, Eat, and Pack in Korea [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaqG_vrzIdo
7. cari cakes. (2018 June 30). Cost Of Living in Korea | How Much Do I Spend in a Week in Seoul VLOG [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVnkQhcro_A
8. cari cakes. (2017 December 16). How To Find an Apartment in Korea | Zigbang/직방 English [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK4u-4Is_6I
9. cari cakes. (2018 January 23). 📷 Make Your Trip to Korea Unique | Local's Guide to Bukchon Hanok Village in Seoul [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ScXD7IZUXQ>
10. cari cakes. (2017 November 28). My Weekend Trip to Busan, Korea | VLOG [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Arf3QZ2n-ZA>
11. cari cakes. (2018 December 25) Trying to Save My Skin in Seoul, Korea | Excel V Laser and Aqua Peel [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbpMmnDeOWs>
12. cari cakes. (2019 September 7). a messy but beautiful day in my life in seoul, korea VLOG [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkT6c8UGiY0>
13. cari cakes. (2018 April 3). Incheon Airport Terminal 2 Mini Tour | How To Use The Free Shuttle Bus in Seoul, Korea [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPmNt99g1qE>
14. cari cakes. (2017 February 6). Staying at Korea's First Capsule Hotel | Darakhyu (다락휴) @ Seoul's Incheon Airport [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BzEU2D3dig>
15. cari cakes. (2019 February 12). Being Alone in Korea (or anywhere really) | Life in Seoul VLOG [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0_rB1RklcY
16. cari cakes. (2017 September 26). ✨ Korean Magic Setting Perm | Korean Hair Salon Experience ✨ [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tf3eiEMrHDQ>

17. cari cakes. (2019 May 11). Apartment Hunting in Seoul, Korea VLOG [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOOrUSyJ0Q9k>
 18. cari cakes. (2018 November 3). Autumn in Seoul, Korea | What to Do, Wear, and Pack VLOG [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRLbl6y9foE>
 19. cari cakes. (2019 August 17). an honest vlog of my life in seoul, korea [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtMPHp60K-E>
 20. cari cakes. (2017 August 29). Flying into Incheon Airport in Seoul for the First Time | Korea Travel Vlog [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S7avKSvteo>
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1. DearSeoul. (2017 February 26). New Seoul Apartment Tour (\$800) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIS6lbFNLpQ>
 2. DearSeoul. (2016 June 30). Seoul Apartment Tour! (\$625) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7J1ZdQ323c>
 3. DearSeoul. (2017 April 1). Meerkat Cafe & Mural Village | Vlog 1 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8RF4KQUQB4>
 4. DearSeoul. (2017 June 17). Explore Seoul With Us | Jay's B-day Lunch! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hhZo1W6H8I>
 5. DearSeoul. (2017 April 21). Seoul Trickeye Museum | VLOG [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHxuqana-Fo>
 6. DearSeoul. (2019 May 24). Cooking Korean Food For My Korean Boyfriend! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiHOdSr2gPQ>
 7. DearSeoul. (2017 June 5). Amazing Bakery Cafe in Seoul! | VLOG [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apNUdCI7IAAs>
 8. DearSeoul. (2017 April 17). We Went to Osaka!! | VLOG + Airbnb Tour [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OKBUowfGu0>
 9. DearSeoul. (2017 August 6). 7 Ways to Survive Summer in Seoul! [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_OTH6u2Mz8
 10. DearSeoul. (2016 June 27). Weekend in the Life | DearSeoul [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i493Y49Qu-I>
 11. DearSeoul. (2019 April 25). GRWM + Date Night w/ my BF [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3RRPVo9vss>
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1. Farina Jo. (2018 October 24). 🇰🇷 My FULL BTS CONCERT Experience Movie - BERLIN 2018 Love Yourself World Tour | Farina Jo [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vcr2wOkPE0>
 2. Farina Jo. (2019 May 15). I Saw BTS Up Close In Korea - Full Front Row Kpop Concert Experience VLOG [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BBPJgWXN7o>
 3. Farina Jo. (2018 June 1). Arriving in Korea (MY FIRST TIME) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jKtLIYL8ZI>

4. Farina Jo. (2018 December 1). 🏠 Underground Budget Shopping in Seoul - Gangnam [Vide]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtArFIGPZ0s>
5. Farina Jo. (2018 June 3). I spent 2000€ on BTS Tickets.. | BTS Love Yourself World Tour 2018 (ENG SUB) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OROtialldQQ>
6. Farina Jo. (2018 June 23). Visiting Big Hit Entertainment in Seoul [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RatNQHVm7c>
7. Farina Jo. (2019 June 20). My Full BTS LONDON WEMBLEY Concert Experience 2019 | Day 2 VLOG Speak Yourself [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Y57r3Epv1U>
8. Farina Jo. (2018 November 20). 💌 Dating Hotspots in Seoul [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Amu4HzLg7-k>
9. Farina Jo. (2018 August 23). Midnight Feast at Korean 7-ELEVEN Convenience Store [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yQ0Uj_-I7I
10. Farina Jo. (2018 July 14). I got a Korean Traditional Makeover | Gyeongbokgung Palace [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw1IzOg55og>
11. Farina Jo. (2018 June 28). My First Time in Busan [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wq9FBKHrCb0>
12. Farina Jo. (2018 November 11). Visiting Jimin & Jungkook's Hometown BUSAN 🇰🇷 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8pwXOFN8OM>
13. Farina Jo. (2017 October 28). Korean Film Festival & Kpop Dance Contest in Germany (ENG SUB)(한국자막) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aXSejJLUUE>
14. Farina Jo. (2019 May 24). My Brother Arrives In Korea For The First Time [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLMfGJ7ykE>
15. Farina Jo. (2019 March 3). 🎒 Seoul on a Budget 2019 [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6v3v3x_7kGM
16. Farina Jo. (2018 June 16). Eating like Korean Royalty in Jeollanam-Do [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2CDsP4xdmw>
17. Farina Jo. (2018 July 8). Our Apartment In Seoul | Room Tour AirBnb [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYsI-3GVyKQ>
18. Farina Jo. (2018 June 9). Exploring South Korea's Beautiful Nature | Geoje-Do [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOo_byEAXEs
19. Farina Jo. (2019 January 30). ✨ My Boyfriends Bias noticed him *DAY6 BERLIN* - 2019 YOUTH Concert Europe [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_mdOl_xf8o
20. Farina Jo. (2019 March 9). Buying BTS SPEAK YOURSELF 2019 Tickets | London Wembley Stadium World Tour [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SLuabyD14U>

1. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2012 July 9). My attempt at a self-introduction at a Korean High School [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKTmd205Qxw>
2. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2018 March 25). What a (Satur)Day at Seoul Fashion Week is Like! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17uTjYIN5ts>
3. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2017 August 15). We Randomly Bumped into Kpop Idols! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0quXyBxHGI>
4. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2017 March 17). Vlog | A Little Bit of Mamamoo, Jung Joon Young, and Boys24!!! 😊 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77NcEds6IvI>
5. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2017 April 2). Vlog | Seoul Fashion Week 2017 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUhqeLgc-tU>
6. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2016 November 4). The FIRST EVER Halal Restaurant Week Korea 2016! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnMSbvTzqLM>
7. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2015 March 21). Hijabi in Seoul City Vlog | Pancakes and Halal Korean Food~ [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4DKeXPTWPs>
8. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2018 October 21). Finally Attending Shows and Seeing Idols at Seoul Fashion Week! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBUollbD3oM>
9. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2018 August 19). Meeting Lee Kwang Soo! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98B0XCp0uCw>
10. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2017 February 2). Interviewed By My New Korean Teacher 🇰🇷 & Filming with WishTrendTV! [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4y-eONF_i10
11. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2017 October 22). Seoul Fashion Week S/S 2018 | Highlight PERFORMED!! 🇰🇷 😊 [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_bIKvLwGjs
12. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2015 June 28). Eid Guesthouse | The First Muslim-Catered Guesthouse in Itaewon, Seoul, Korea [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoVd0oWrZTI>
13. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2018 April 15). Delicious Vegan Burgers 🍔, Korean Birthday Party 🎉, & Mini Haul (Surprise Update!) 😊 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlvJqtzpkuA>
14. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2017 January 19). VISITING THE GOBLIN'S HOUSE~! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Yt-H9er4YQ>
15. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2016 August 27). DIA TV FESTIVAL 2016 & MEETING THE JROD TWINS!! [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7_DaCo-jnY
16. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2017 May 21). 서울 아프리카 페스티벌 | Seoul Africa Festival 2017 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L66a0LspARc>
17. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2017 July 16). Seeing Jay Park and Getting the VIP Treatment [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHgXSyJE7Lo>

18. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2016 December 6). Follow Me to a Cooking Class with HALAL KOREAN FOOD! [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fZLQPvYWC0>
 19. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2018 July 8). LOCO (AOMG) GAVE US FREE MILKSHAKES!!! 🍷💕 *NOT CLICKBAIT* [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrSqOe6fr3c>
 20. Hijabi in Seoul City. (2018 April 1). Shopping with Q2Han and Accidentally Finding a Drama Filming Site [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfG4xqxJxUo>
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1. kali lowe. (2018 March 20). My \$230/Month Korean Room // GOSHIWON TOUR 🏠 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVSs7Gk28yk>
 2. kali lowe. (2018 March 14). FIRST DAY AT A KOREAN UNIVERSITY 📖 // Korea Abroad [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkR0KiMO5OQ>
 3. kali lowe. (2018 November 16). my korean self study routine [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8Md7bAnJIQ>
 4. kali lowe. (2019 March 23). a day in my life in korea [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOsjnmBVdzM>
 5. kali lowe. (2018 May 8). day in my life at a korean university ✍ [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8htJs654mA>
 6. kali lowe. (2019 Jul 3). day in korea [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyLpj9NACRM>
 7. kali lowe. (2018 June 2). how to apply to a korean uni // requirements, funding, and life in korea 🎓 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZgvHINRKiw>
 8. kali lowe. (2019 March 7). flying to korea KR (a vlog) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77VxMZgE2E8>
 9. kali lowe. (2018 May 22). korean university tour // sogang university 🏫 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRSz8LZJu2U>
 10. kali lowe. (2018 June 8). 50 facts about me 🌀 [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yxjd_kI2Fok
 11. kali lowe. (2018 July 23). korean spicy rice cakes // lets make tteokbokki (떡볶이) 🍲👁 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifi-CDWToNg>
 12. kali lowe. (2019 June 10). shopping in korea [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoPPTLmoCuo>
 13. kali lowe. (2019 April 9). korean host family apartment tour [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sska4cSkmZQ>
 14. kali lowe. (2018 September 8). watch me write in korean // relaxing ✍ [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pm24Zffh6PY>
 15. kali lowe. (2018 April 1). getting a tattoo in korea 🖇 // study abroad vlog [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB0IUzcDpGA>

16. kali lowe. (2018 April 30). cutting my own bangs 🧑✂️ [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6SM9pODIg>
 17. kali lowe. (2018 September 25). korean chicken mukbang // Q&A [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhuvTfejEU>
 18. kali lowe. (2018 August 6) leg routine to get thick // leg + glute gains [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=533dxbMWJ3Q>
 19. kali lowe. (2019 March 18). wearing hanboks and exploring gyeongbokgung palace ✨ [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niLuh0ycidc>
 20. kali lowe. (2019 May 18). weekend in busan, korea 🇰🇷 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yNnk-HRuec>
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1. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 October 22). Korean Students Who SLAYED at Seoul Fashion Week! 18SS [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-t-v9d1aUM>
 2. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 March 26). First Time Modeling in Korea! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5BqSsfHkyA>
 3. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 October 6). Average Day in Korea for ME! :) (IRL vlog #2) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od2JXCeuEk>
 4. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 April 2). What Korean Students Wore to Seoul Fashion Week! 17FW [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VptREZfa5wQ>
 5. whitneybae vlogs. (2018 January 8). REUNITED WITH THE MODELS AND..YEAH, I FANGIRLED A BIT! 🤩 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTHZJ8N394c>
 6. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 March 17). My Experience Working with KPOP Idols! :) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-cM7ECbLV0>
 7. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 September 7). Korean Dance Class NEVER BEEN THIS LIT! 💃 with Alex Reid and Hyoyeon! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySuOSnTeGoo>
 8. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 February 10). Experiencing a Korean Celebrity Beauty Salon! - this was INTENSE! [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rb7QqYVtnxo>
 9. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 May 6). Experience Wearing a Korean Hanbok For a Day 😊 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=647ev-1bzbs>
 10. whitneybae vlogs. (2018 March 25). SQUAD GOALS at Seoul Fashion Week 18FW [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64gYNB0ak-I>
 11. whitneybae vlogs. (2018 December 10). Korean Celebrity Hair Salon Experience! vlogmas [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBD08JNFx9Y>
 12. whitneybae vlogs. (2018 March 15). Taking a Mom and Baby Class! 🍼 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji0ipB4iDyA>
 13. whitneybae vlogs. (2016 September 29). hanging out with boys makes me stressed!!!! :p [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIPxJ9uW3FM>

14. whitneybae vlogs. (2019 January 31). Got my Picture Photoshopped in Korea and WOW! HE CHANGED A LOT OF THINGS!!! [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3VofV4p1g>
15. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 January 15). Running Backstage to Meet K-POP IDOLS! (embarrassing fangirling moments) [한국어 자막] [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOH24bC1QMo>
16. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 September 17). Modeling in My First Korean Makeup Campaign! [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z_yDG1DQd4
17. whitneybae vlogs. (2016 August 5). KCon Day 3 - A Serious Fangirling Moment!!! #KconLA2016 [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtxidlXO_D8
18. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 December 8). SO MUCH SHADE!! 🤔🤔 with heyitsfeiii, Edward Avila, and Rilaccoco! 🐼 VLOGMAS #8 2017 [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FagZ_CmDWio
19. whitneybae vlogs. (2017 October 27). I Tried Riding TerryTV's Segway. obviously a bad idea. lol [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WYOu-I8xtM>
20. whitneybae vlogs. (2018 May 20). BIG HIT ENTERTAINMENT PASSED AUDITION EXPERIENCE [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KO5ZDzmvwY>

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Introduction & Statement of Purpose:

I am conducting this interview as part of my dissertation research at the University of Washington in the Department of Communication. I am interested in your participation in and relationship to online content creation about South Korea and Korean culture.

Would you mind if I record this interview and take notes? (*wait for audible consent*)

Remember that you do not have to answer any question(s) you would prefer not to answer and can stop the interview at any time. Also, all the information in this interview will remain confidential and cannot be traced back to you. I will be the only person to transcribe the audio recording, and will be the only person working with and analyzing this interview data. Your name will not appear in my dissertation or any corresponding publications or presentations. Instead, I will give you the option to choose a pseudonym or to allow me to choose one for you.

At this time, I want to check in to see if you have any questions. Do you have any questions or concerns regarding the consent form you have received or your participation in this study? (*wait for answer*)

Great! Are you ready to begin? (*wait for audible consent*)

Prospective Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Probes:

While the following questions structured my interviews with creators, our conversations certainly went in different directions, and I adapted accordingly. One example of an unanticipated divergence was when creators continued to discuss their experiences being a foreign woman in South Korea at length. This ended up significantly shaping the direction of my dissertation. That said, these were the initial questions I had drafted, which helped guide the interviews if and when I needed to refocus our conversation.

Can you tell me a bit about yourself? How would you describe yourself to someone who has never met you?

- How would your friends describe you?

What made you interested in/want to go to South Korea?

- Tell me about your first memory in Korea.
- How did you decide to start making content about your experiences abroad?

Tell me about your work life. What does your day-to-day look like?

- What is the most rewarding thing about your job?
- What is the most difficult thing about your job?

Think of a post/video that you are especially proud of and describe it to me.

- What made you decide to create this? What makes it stick out in your mind?
- How did your audience respond to this?

Tell me about your passions. What keeps you motivated?

Please describe your relationship with your viewers.

- Is it ever difficult to maintain this relationship?
- What do you do to make sure people continue to engage with your content?
- How do you think your viewers see you?

How do your interactions with people online compare to those offline?

What do you plan to do in the future?

- Tell me about how you see your life in five years.