

THE AFFECT OF LABOR: THE PRODUCTION OF AUTHENTICITY AND
INTIMACY IN ETSY, KIVA AND TWITCH

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Abstract

THE AFFECT OF LABOR: THE PRODUCTION OF AUTHENTICITY AND INTIMACY IN ETSY, KIVA AND TWITCH

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The rise of digital micro-entrepreneurship has been defined in part by a reliance on affective appeals to create a sense of intimacy between users and thus engender followings and transactional relationships. I argue that the ubiquity of certain affects can be particular to political economic contexts – in this case neoliberalism – and tied to ideologies of this era and its cultural and technological particularities, which I am labeling historical affects. While I postulate that historical affects can be evinced in various historical moments, I examine those affects that are crucial to neoliberalism and late capitalism, and specifically within a digital context. The overarching neoliberal affect examined here is authenticity, a mode of self-representation that aligns with dominant neoliberal ideologies and platform-specific corporate narratives, as well as those affects that are particular to gendered and racialized representations and responses. The deployment of markers of authenticity fosters an affective public that coheres around the

amplification and performance of shared sentiments such as feminine displays of passion and exuberance tied to postfeminist ideologies on Etsy, neocolonial celebrations of empowerment and a hardworking entrepreneurial spirit through the microlending organization Kiva, and the cultivation of celebrity by and identity-based and crowd-fueled attacks against streamers of Twitch. The imbrication of various affects with specific neoliberal ideologies and platforms functions differentially in each iteration to produce an affective matrix, or the constitutive formation of affect in each object. Varying affective formations, or matrices, and similar affective appeals or discursive representations, can have different meanings and implications dependent upon cultural context as well as other factors; the contexts create different affective realities and iterations of ideological imperatives as well as representations and embodied experiences.

1. Introduction: Authentic Connections

I began selling on Etsy in 2015, while living with my parents in rural Utah and working two jobs before moving across the country to begin graduate school. The idea to sell cross stitches on Etsy, a craft I had recently relearned to keep myself busy during the long winter, came from what many of my friends and peers were experiencing at the same time: cobbling together a livelihood that incorporated their hobbies, while living with their parents or in group housing situations. I realized that my experience was not unique; I, like so many millennials, was educated, but could not find sustainable employment or affordable housing, and thus returned home and began relying on skills associated with domestic leisure for income and fulfillment, if not just to fight boredom. I continued selling on Etsy while in graduate school and began reflecting on why exactly I was spending so much of my time on this endeavor when it never provided me with more than pocket change and yet demanded so much of my time and emotional energy. I more acutely considered this latter point the longer I invested in this side project; why was I consistently dedicating so much of myself to something that didn't seem to be giving me much back? I realized that perhaps like my peers who were quilting, pickling, and jewelry making, that I was investing in the possibility of Etsy, of its entrepreneurial promise, as much as its reality. I would spend hours determining whether social media

posts were helping draw traffic to my shop, or which search tags to use to bring in viewers, and just when I would decide it was a hopeless endeavor, I would hear the “cha-ching!” of the Etsy Seller app on my smartphone – another sale! I was affectively invested in this project and the continued possibility that I could turn a substantial profit, despite all evidence to the contrary, but the “cha-ching!” and the positive reviews and compliments from buyers kept bringing me back. This experience of mine is familiar to many who have decided to employ their existing skills and passions as money-making endeavors, particularly in a post-recession economy that has not been kind to those with degrees and debt.

The affective relationship I had with my entrepreneurial experience with Etsy, and why so many other sellers continued to invest their time and energy into this platform that provided less than 30% of sellers with a full-time income, began to consume me, and I expanded my internal inquiry to think more broadly about self-entrepreneurship, digital sites of income generation, and the reasons why more people are turning to these spaces in hope of earning money. Alongside this, I began considering why so many people were willing to invest in others in these digital platforms: what would drive people to buy goods on Etsy when they often cost so much more than big box stores? Or to pay to watch someone play a video game online that they could easily play themselves or watch for free? At this point, I hypothesized that it must be something beyond the products themselves that enticed people to invest in these sites and people, at the same time that individuals were selling their products, and some form of themselves, online as a way to cope with a dismal job market and meet the growing pressure to follow one’s passion,

rather than just financial stability. But, this hypothesis certainly did not answer why this shift had occurred – why so many people had specifically sought out digital entrepreneurship and digital intimacy, or affective connections, which has brought me to consider my primary research question: Why has affect emerged in digital transactions and what can that tell us about the current political economic moment? Answering this question, and subsidiary questions, has brought me to considering the implications of late capitalist shifts in labor practices, as well as the embeddedness of concomitant neoliberal ideologies that incite individuals, such as myself, to invest in themselves as the site of labor and profit, and to see themselves as the site of success and failure. Increasingly, individuals adhere to the logic that if one succeeds, it is because they worked hard and were the right kind of citizen, and if they fail, it is because they did not try hard enough – not because of systemic issues that might undercut their efforts. The following project considers the imbrication of self-entrepreneurship with both affects and affective labor, as well as the contemporary political economic moment to make an argument about their deep, and particular, ties.

In order to examine the relationship between affect, digital self-entrepreneurialism and the current political economic moment, I have selected three digital platforms that necessarily involve economic transactions as well as different forms of interactions and levels of mediation between users. Of the three platforms, Etsy is the most straightforward in terms of one individual purchasing a particular good from another. Etsy is an online marketplace focusing on handmade and vintage goods sold primarily by individual women from their homes all around the world. Started in 2005, Etsy slowly

grew through building connections with feminist arts and crafters participating in offline craft fairs and online social media support and networking groups (M. Brown, n.d.) and is now a publicly traded company with a valuation of \$2 billion, approximately 35.8 million active buyers, and another two million active sellers (as of 2018), making it the most widely used platform for buying and selling handmade goods in the United States. The second platform, Kiva, is a U.S.-based microlending nonprofit through which individuals and groups (predominantly from Western nations) make microloans to individuals and businesses in 85 different countries (including the U.S.). Founded in 2005, Kiva's loan process begins with a minimum loan amount of \$25 from one of the approximately 1.7 million lenders to one of the approximately 2.9 million borrowers, 81% of whom are women ("About us," n.d.). While Kiva does offer a modified loan program within the United States, much of its focus is in Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Kiva stands out from other sites of its kind through its emphasis on making microloans accessible to lenders the way Grameen Bank (the first global microfinance institution) made them accessible to borrowers, which is accomplished through a crowdsourcing model that differs from sites such as GoFundMe or Kickstarter as the givers are lenders rather than donors. The final site I will examine, Twitch, differs from Etsy and Kiva as it is a video streaming platform where streamers profit through donations made by individuals to their particular channel, or stream. Started in 2005 as "justin.tv," the site was envisioned to stream people's lives "around the clock" (Cook, n.p.), but after years of struggle relaunched as Twitch, and specifically geared toward gaming, in 2011. Though initially envisioned as akin to reality television, the site quickly

developed into video game streaming and it has grown to one of the highest sources of internet traffic in North America (Stephenson, 2018). It boasts over 15 million daily active users, with males comprising 81.5% of their user base, and 55% of all users ranging in age between 18 to 34 (“Audience,” n.d.). Of these users, over 2.2 million stream live on Twitch each month (“Audience,” n.d.). I am particularly interested in these platforms’ reliance on different forms of transactions – purchasing an item, lending to a microentrepreneur, or donating to a streamer – and how users are enticed into these exchanges, particularly in cases when there is little to no guaranteed return on their investment; while Etsy buyers receive an item, they could of course find something cheaper elsewhere that is not handmade, Kiva lenders receive no interest on their loan or guarantee they will see their money returned, and Twitch users are not required to pay for access to view streams.¹ The continued investment in these sites left me to question what else is happening on these platforms, in interactions between users, to encourage an economic exchange, and for users to return and spend regularly.

My research questions posit that affect, and the building of affective relationships, have emerged as key components of contemporary digital interactions – and monetary transactions – while expanding the inquiry to ask what this emergence of affect can tell us about current political economic conditions, as well as what the particularities of each site’s functioning and imagining of its user base and their relationship to intersectional identities can reveal. Each of these sites necessarily function differently, in terms of their

¹ While not required to pay for access to videos, some streamers limit access to their chat unless viewers are paid subscribers, and most streamers offer access to emotes and emojis for subscribers. Yet neither of these benefits explain the consistent one-time donations that viewers make.

aims, ideological work, aesthetic presentation, and possibilities for (inter)action for users, which leads me to question what distinctions around affect and affective relationships can be extrapolated from each. I similarly consider what the role of particular visual and textual elements is in addressing consumers, and how these factors make a broader case for how and why affect functions in digital transactions. The prevalence of and reliance on myriad forms of communication between parties demonstrates the significance of affective relationships and emotional connections in order to foster a monetary exchange in digital spaces that encourage direct engagement between parties. As users engage through different means, they also represent themselves and are represented differently dependent upon the ethos of the platform: Etsy sellers are encouraged to highlight domesticity, while Kiva borrowers are depicted as hardworking, and Twitch streamers are expected to perform as high-level gamers with the exclusive insider knowledge of the Twitch community. Differential articulations of race and gender also inflect platform-specific affective presentations and engagements, marking how each site functions through a complex affective matrix that is particular to the imagined intersectional identities, mediated forms of communication, ideological constructs, and economic exchanges of their users.

Neoliberalism as a set of ideological principles, and late capitalist job shifts, provide a partial account of the ideological commitments and economic motivations that users negotiate in these spaces, marking the starting point for this political economic analysis, alongside platform-specific frameworks including postfeminism, neocolonialism and digital misogyny. In sites such as Etsy, Kiva and Twitch that rely on

the performance of authenticity and the perception of intimacy and shared values or experience, users participate in the construction of affective (micro) publics that cohere around shared sentiments and ideological commitments. Yet, paradoxically, these same users – particularly the micro entrepreneurs are individualized in their embodiment of neoliberal ideals and pursuit of the good life; their successes and failures are positioned as the result of their own passion and hard work, or lack thereof – not structural inequalities or systemic issues. In this way, users affirm the validity of neoliberal ideals including an emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility for one's life position and perpetuate cruel optimism, or the deferral of their own attainment of happiness or the good life onto an imagined future. The affective connections experienced by users are likewise individualized, creating the perception that buyers and sellers or lenders and borrowers are having meaningful, affective interactions, despite the general lack of direct interaction between parties and the intentionally broad appeal of their narratives and performance of identity. The remainder of this introductory chapter outlines how these research questions are answered and this argument constructed, beginning by correlating the rise of affective labor and self-entrepreneurship with neoliberalism and its guiding ideologies, and situating feminized, as well as digital, labor within this contemporary moment. I then elucidate my theoretical contributions to this field before briefly outlining the thematic specifics of the remaining chapters.

Neoliberalism is the starting point for this analysis, as the specific imbrication of self-entrepreneurialism as an ideological goal and economic necessity coincides with the various practices and policies that have come to be commonly associated with

neoliberalism, such as “strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, p.2), which has translated to the privatization of, and development of markets within, various industries that had previously been under state control and the relentless expansion of markets. Alongside these widespread changes, stable employment options have diminished through increasing short-term and part-time employment, (sub-) contracting, and the normalization of precarious labor (Adkins, 2016). While neoliberalism expands markets and labor globally, it crucially – in all of its iterations – maintains a divided and hierarchized workforce that is dependent on individualized and feminized labor to continue its expansion and entrenchment of ideological imperatives, primarily that workers see successes and failures as of their own doing, not connected to larger systems of power. Disciplinary tactics, or techniques, are used to ensure compliance with this system, and particularly here, to frame the individual as an entrepreneur of the self – an active investor in their own human capital – rather than a partner in an exchange system of waged labor. One consequence of this is universal production, in which *all* relations are subsumed by capital and not limited to those actions that are distinctly waged and contracted, but incorporate incitements for laborers to employ their full capacity, including emotional and affective labor forms. In this way, neoliberalism attempts to function as a totalizing force, managing individuals and populations simultaneously, through a logic “based on both economic (efficiency) and ethical (self-responsibility) claims” (Ong, p. 11). The users in each of the examined platforms are thus self-managing, using various technologies of the self to bring them in line with entrepreneurialism and the demands on the whole self as a site of labor.

The logic of neoliberalism and its attempts to align the practices of individuals with its ideological imperatives function not only at the level of markets and economics, but are in fact structured through cultural and political identities such as race, gender, sexuality and class (Duggan, 2012). The attention to and manipulation of these identity markers are not subsidiary or secondary elements of neoliberalism, but fundamental to its ability to funnel resources upward, by embracing and extending inequalities while simultaneously obscuring their significance and inherent relationship to neoliberalism. This is seen particularly through the strong reliance on the ideologies of privatization and personal responsibility; not only are successes and failures individualized and privatized, but so are struggles for equality, which become reframed under the colorblind guise of “diversity” and “tolerance” (Duggan, p. 21). The differential articulation of ideologies regarding gender and race can be seen in how Etsy normalizes whiteness and traditional gender roles, with non-white ethnicity acting as a nostalgic connection to an imagined past; how Kiva constructs and exoticizes racial difference as a hierarchical dynamic that obscures the role of global capitalism in subjugating non-Western populations in the first place, and how microfinance’s part in trapping individuals in predatory loan cycles perpetuates the cycle of poverty; and how Twitch users antagonize streamers for failed adherence to normative standards of gender and sexuality, with any non-white racial reference or appearance to or as non-white on the part of the streamers an invitation to harassment.

In addition to a reliance on the deployment of the full self as a site of labor and the manipulation of identity markers, neoliberalism importantly depends on the affective

and emotional labor of the feminized workforce. While affective and emotional labor forms are not solely tied to techniques of neoliberalism, they have become endemic to its contemporary configurations including emotional capitalism, or as “a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other” (Illouz, p. 5), which is intrinsically tied to late capitalism, digitality, and corporate culture. Arlie Hochschild (2012) originated the term emotional labor to describe requirements that one induce or suppress feelings in order to reflect the appropriate attitude in oneself and produce the appropriate response or state of mind in others (p. 6). Emotional labor is largely invisible (to the consumer), and necessarily occurs in professions that have an interactive element with the public and as a feminized labor form, is a means of providing marketized comfort to consumers, usually with a particular corporate narrative in mind. These practices fall in line with neoliberal ideologies of self-management, personal responsibility and individualism by offloading this indirectly waged labor onto the worker through the guise of customer service and demand a level of performativity in emotions and affective states. Seeing the growing imbrication of affective and emotional states with labor and capital, Eva Illouz (2007) ties emotions to capitalism as a way to understand how Westerners have become increasingly aware and introspective regarding our emotions, as they simultaneously are instrumentalized within corporate culture, marital relations, and our digital lives. Illouz describes myriad ways in which people manage their emotions and self-presentation both online and in work and domestic spaces, to the degree that emotional and economic relations and behavior have become reciprocal elements of life that adhere to the same systems of logic. While these authors

have laid important groundwork in understanding the relationship between emotions and the demands of late capitalism, there is more to be said about how affect in particular functions in relation to political economic systems (primarily neoliberalism here) as well as digital labor, as these theories do not account for the specifics of labor performed through Etsy, Kiva or Twitch.

With cultural and economic shifts associated with neoliberalism, feminized labor and the instrumentalization of happiness, passion, and feminized affective states (Ahmed, 2010, p. 10) have become hallmarks of contemporary global and digital labor. This emphasis has particular implications for women, as they are now expected to balance increasing demands of parenting, domesticity and entrepreneurialism, alongside expectations that they “invest in all aspects of their lives as potential workplace assets... often understood as concerning a collapse of the distinction between intimate and working lives, home and work, production and social reproduction, and between abstract and living labor” (Adkins, p. 9). While women are not necessarily returning to the home specifically as the traditional ‘housewife,’ “expectations for conventional femininity have expanded beyond those of physical appearance and nurturance to include career-oriented success” (Levine, p. 6), with each of these competing demands manifesting, at least partially, through techniques, or “gendered scripts” and even “happiness scripts” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 59), which “are upheld as paths to the good life” (Wilson and Yochim, p. 242). Happiness, and attendant feminized affective states, are “key to sustaining neoliberal social order” (Wilson and Yochim, p. 245) as they orient individuals toward happy goals such as the stable and financially secure family – or ‘the good life’ – that is

increasingly out of reach. Indeed, contemporary feminized labor forms including the reliance on affective displays and exchanges reflect the pursuit of ‘the good life’ as an emotional, or inner, quest as much as one connected to systems of power and intersectional identifications. Etsy sellers are expected to fulfill these ideals by always being present in the home, and often selling items directly related to or inspired by these endeavors – while also being entrepreneurial and investing in themselves and their ‘creative capacities’. Kiva makes similar demands on the predominantly female borrowers, demanding their performance of adherence to traditional gender roles as well as being “hard-working,” while Twitch streamers (both male and female) explicitly collapse their home and work lives as they stream from home, promoting what was once considered exclusively leisure (gaming) as a potentially lucrative career path. These new workers are experiencing a collapse in their labor and leisure, and an increased dependence on the deployment of affective labor and a reliance on developing intimacy with consumers, as they embark on entrepreneurial projects.

As this feminized labor is often un(der)waged or undervalued, there are diminished financial gains for the typically female populations who pursue it, yet this does not necessarily mean that populations recognize themselves as devalued, or even as experiencing downward social mobility. Rather, a living wage is replaced with fulfilling some supposed innate aspect of oneself (explored here through creativity) and a feminized affective relationship to one’s work – including passion and exuberant enthusiasm, which function as “ideological effects” giving laborers the *feeling* of being middle class or aspiring to ‘the good life’ (McRobbie, 2016, p. 11). In order to ensure that

individuals will continue to labor despite diminished returns and the collapse of the social safety net and union protections, financial stability is replaced not only with the *feel* of being successful, but specifically in successfully pursuing one's individual passion, and being happy in one's labor. Indeed, "passionate work," "happiness at work" and "pleasure in work" (McRobbie, 2016, p. 36) have become measures of success not because financial success is so easily achieved, but precisely because it is so elusive; pleasure and creativity become stand-ins for financial stability, for reaching the good life. These rationales, or ideological effects, encourage individuals – primarily women who are traditionally undervalued in masculinized workspaces, and who simultaneously are experiencing the pressures of post-Fordism – to embark on otherwise precarious career paths (McRobbie, p. 37), such as selling handmade goods on Etsy or streaming gameplay on Twitch. The pursuit of passion, happiness or pleasure in work is a distinctly feminized affect, marking how the subjects of this increasingly prevalent labor form "are required to be normatively feminine, with passionate work expressing the way in which this is exuded as bodily style, an exuberant enthusiasm" (McRobbie, 2016, p. 113); such affective presentations are associated, in the current political economic context of neoliberalism, with happiness (with oneself and career) and authenticity – despite the prescriptive and expected nature of such displays. I take McRobbie's analysis of feminized labor as a guiding principle in understanding the relationship laborers have to their work and ideological imperatives, but will add to this contribution a holistic analysis of the role affect plays in this process, as she limits this to describing how individuals come to 'feel' middle class and aspirational.

Notions of what constitutes living a good life are malleable, often reflecting structures of feeling (Williams, 1977), or dominant and emergent forms of experience, and circulate through happy objects (Ahmed, 2010) – literal and figurative representations of happiness – which act as connective tissues between people and orient them together toward the ideal of a good life (Berlant, 2011). Yet, as the good life, or an imagined future with financial stability and other trappings of happiness, becomes less tangible and further deferred, authenticity becomes a prevailing stand-in; by being an ‘authentic’ self – pursuing passions and prioritizing self-fulfillment over profit, etc. – the good life has been achieved for the individual, despite the imperative to ‘be authentic’ functioning systemically as an ideological project to encourage divestment from traditional labor forms. Authenticity has become a key identifier of a successful neoliberal citizen – as entrepreneurs demonstrate their authenticity, consumers can be brought into its orbit by engaging with them, both affectively and economically. Developing connections premised on a shared relationship to or identification with authenticity seem intimate and are increasingly significant in fostering a potential transaction. While other affects will be considered in this analysis, accordant with the particularities of each site, authenticity is a through line between each research object, and endemic to neoliberalism’s operation more broadly.

Authenticity has become akin to a dominant structure of feeling, reflecting dynamic changes and responses to structural and formalized elements of society and can be tied to the specific political economic formation of neoliberalism. Ben Anderson (2016) theorizes the existence of ‘neoliberal affects,’ or those atmospheres that animate

neoliberal reason and accompany the translation of such reason into tangible policies and projects (p. 736). While I share Anderson's commitment to varying iterations of neoliberalism and concomitant structures of feeling as well as collective affects, including the notion that "other socio-spatial formations are themselves already-always affective, so neoliberal affects will coexist and blur with the affects of... the promise of a normative good life that sustained social democracy" (p. 735-6), I depart from his supposition that particular affects cannot be collectively identified and directly tied to neoliberalism (p. 736). I am arguing, rather, that particular affects can be linked to neoliberalism not in so far as "neoliberalism determines what is felt" (p. 736), but that affects such as authenticity become energized and magnified in relationship to neoliberal ideologies and labor formations tied to late capitalism, encouraging certain types of affective exchanges, or exchanges of certain affects, that resonate ideologically and personally. Likewise, as much as Anderson argues that 'neoliberal affects' are atmospheric rather than personally felt or identifiable, I argue that the individualization of neoliberalism includes affective exchanges and experiences as much as labor; neoliberal affects are both collective and individualizing and encouraging individual experiences and relationships. Neoliberalism does not determine what is felt, but rather its ideologies, dependent upon their context, are determining of the affective premise of particular economic interactions.

Shared affective experiences that are indicative of a historical moment can also be understood to function not just as structures of feeling in response to societal formations, but as what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism," or a mode of affective

engagement that defers the present onto an endlessly unattainable future (2011). ‘The good life’ is a promise, or ideological fantasy, that good feeling can be attained in the future, despite that deferred pursuit’s foreclosure of good feeling in the present, marking it as a form of cruel optimism, which occurs when that which is pursued prevents the present attainment of happiness. Affect functions as a structure of “optimistic attachment” to such fantasies, while simultaneously working as an atmosphere that allows one to persist in a present made livable only by the hope invested in these deferred possibilities. Echoing Raymond Williams in his analysis of the structure of feeling, Berlant claims that the present, as a historical moment, is sensed at first affectively before it becomes a coherent event or dominant state of affairs. And, while that affect may seem personal, to the extent that it can be recognized in others it cannot but be shared, and thus is a historical and felt response to a set of affairs that stands at the collective threshold of cognition and signification. This analysis too falls short of defining particular historical affects that are structural to political economic moments, but works to explain (in part) how individuals, in this case digital microentrepreneurs, forge unstable career paths that would seem to more trouble than they are worth in many cases, but that promise a future of happiness and self-fulfillment through authenticity.

The pursuit of ‘the good life,’ or happiness, vis-à-vis authenticity requires affective investment in ideological fantasies including “happy objects,” or those ideals that represent and/or can lead to its attainment (Ahmed, 2010, p. 25). “Happy objects” can be material things – such as handmade goods purchased through Etsy – as well as “anything that we imagine might lead us to happiness, including objects in the sense of

values, practice, styles, as well as aspirations... The promise of happiness takes this form: if you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29). While still deferring happiness onto an ill-defined future, the pursuit of “happy objects” more clearly aligns that pursuit with particular values, such as the nuclear family and domesticity, as well as those physical objects that come to represent these ideals through a process not dissimilar to commodity fetishism. Yet, in this formulation, the labor of the individual is not entirely eclipsed by the object, as the individual and their labor is what imbues an object with its ‘happiness’ value. Happy objects and their circulation represent an ideological project, as investment in these values and goals “is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as if what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals but our failure to follow them” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 7). Much like cruel optimism, such happiness projects demand increased adherence to social norms and values, despite their inability to deliver on their promise; the good life is ultimately not challenged as an ideal, nor is what constitutes this imagined life – only the way it is pursued changes. As will be seen in the following chapters, attachments to “happy objects” are both literal – goods sold online, as well as figurative – including investments in ideals and particularly in the notion of living authentically, which becomes an individualized, though collectively experienced brand of happiness. The pursuit of happiness and its attachment to micro entrepreneurialism is a distinctly Western phenomenon, bringing the sellers of Etsy and streamers of Twitch more in line with the lenders of Kiva – who are typically Westerners and tout their own financial successes – more than its borrowers, who, in their destitution, engage micro

businesses as a means to subsist, rather than as a project of self-actualization or affective branding.

Much the way happy objects reflect aspirational values and orient individuals toward the pursuit of the good life, branding and authenticity as a brand, and “entails the making and selling of immaterial things – feelings and affects, personalities and values – rather than actual goods” (Banet-Weiser, p. 7). For Sarah Banet-Weiser, brands function as an “affective, authentic *relationship* with a consumer” that is premised “on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations” (Banet-Weiser, p. 8). Yet while Banet-Weiser considers this relationship as one of branding and focused on the consumer, I argue that the ‘brand’ is really an ideological imperative, and the imagined relationship can be as much about the producer as the consumer in a transaction, as well as the lender or streamer – and so on. While this branded relationship, or ideological relationship, relationships are not necessarily developed individually, as branded individuals convey this affective charge and relationship through profiles and images more than direct engagements, the carefully curated self-representation of microentrepreneurs represents the perception of intimacy, or “perceived interconnectedness” (Abidin, 2015) more than an actual relationship, but one which is premised on connections to the good life, or its stand in: authenticity. While this relationship may be collectively felt, the perception of interconnectedness or intimacy “privileges individual relationships over collective ones” (Banet-Weiser, p. 10), further entrenching the neoliberal ideology of individualization – of all parties; the individual is the focus of affective engagements as well as the site of labor and personal fulfillment.

The reliance on perceptions of intimacy and capacity to convey authenticity through affective and seemingly personalized means is particularly relevant in digital sites of labor, which lack the unmediated interactive capacity of brick and mortar storefronts and embodied customer service. At the same time, digitality and digital labor are becoming increasingly embedded in and productive of economic and social lives in a globalized world and are particularly relevant for microentrepreneurs as digital platforms offer low costs of entry into the labor market and are relatively accessible.

Concomitantly, it is no accident that digital labor forms have arisen alongside neoliberalism, with its centralization of the individual, individualization and a sense of personal responsibility for one's (financial) well-being, as digitality provides both mediated communities that connect disparate cultures and peoples while simultaneously further isolating individuals – particularly women – in their homes and domestic spaces as re-emergent sites of labor. Digital storefronts (understood broadly here as an interface between an individual selling an often immaterial good and someone investing affectively and monetarily) and the self-employed individuals who manage them engage consumers affectively, while performing aspirational labor that reflects contemporary feminized labor forms.

Digital platforms such as Etsy, Kiva and Twitch produce an “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice,” or networked publics (Luckman, 2015, p. 27), as much as economic vehicles for the corporations that own the space and the micro entrepreneurs who open digital storefronts as they connect individuals through shared interests and ideological commitments. At the

same time, these networked publics are cohered affectively, making them affective publics through the expressions and mobilizations of (shared) sentiment (Papacharissi, p. 125). As outlined by Zizi Papacharissi, affective publics are networked publics “that are sustained by online media but also by modalities of affective intensity” (p. 118) as the various affective mechanisms “amplify the awareness of a particular feeling, the intensity with which it is felt” (p. 118). While Papacharissi limits her analysis to political dialogue within Twitter, I expand this notion to include digital platforms more broadly and their myriad forms of (in)direct engagement including profiles, streams, chats and other forms of messaging. Such affective publics magnify both sentiments and ideological commitments that are tied to corporate narratives (in this case), ensuring the circulation of particular affects through platform-specific means and toward transactional ends. In the following chapters, this will be seen in the Featured Shop and Community profiles of Etsy that use feminine exuberance and enthusiasm to cohere a public around traditional gender norms; the borrower and lender profiles of Kiva that rely on platitudes to diversity as well as the ethos of hard-working personal responsibility to ensure economic empowerment and tout the benefits of free market capitalism, respectively; and the streams and accompanying chats of Twitch that use emojis and emotes as shortcuts of intelligibility and exclusivity to demarcate increasingly micro affective publics that are often defined by misogyny and racism. In each of these case studies, the affective public coheres around the markers of authenticity, though through demonstrably different means as well as ideological commitments (such as postfeminism, neocolonialism, and violence), but with similarly aspirational and value-producing forms of labor.

Aspirational labor promises that individuals will “get paid to do what you love,” a future-oriented mantra that builds on the ideological fantasy of cruel optimism, but which is inherently tied to the prosumer activities of digital media.² Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) describes this aspirational labor as that which has risen with the collapsing of labor and leisure, a growing emphasis on having passion for one’s work, and the increasing insecurity and lack of traditional forms of (creative) employment, with the defining characteristic being the hope that one will *one day* be paid for their affective and value-producing labor (such as fashion blogs and crafting or makeup tutorials). As these (primarily) women wait for their unlikely payoff, “they remain suspended in the consumption and promotion of branded commodities” (p. 6), reinforcing traditional understandings of the relationship between consumption and femininity. While Duffy limits her analysis to aspirational consumers and brand ambassadors, I expand this notion to include digital entrepreneurial projects that rely on aspirational and affective engagements with users in order to sustain a transaction. The entrepreneurs of each of these platforms aspire to be paid by users who feel affectively engaged by their persona, their cultivated sense of intimacy and their demonstration of authenticity that fall in line with corollary ideologies; individualized entrepreneurs engage aspirational labor that is tied to affective engagements *and* publics that cohere the particularities of each platform.

I am contributing to the above theoretical work and case studies by arguing that the ubiquity of certain affects – historical affects – can be particular to political economic

²Prosumers are individuals who both consume and produce a product, and more specifically here, those who engage social media and user-generated content to tout products as (unpaid) brand ambassadors; in using products and speaking to their benefits, they create promotional materials.

contexts, and specifically here, neoliberalism. These neoliberal affects are tied to the ideologies of this era and its cultural and technological particularities. While I postulate that historical affects can possibly be evinced in various historical moments, I am particularly interested, here, in examining those affects that are crucial to neoliberalism and late capitalism, and specifically within a digital context. These neoliberal affects broadly include authenticity and empowerment, as well as those which are particular to gendered and racialized representations and responses, such as feminine displays tied to postfeminist ideologies on Etsy, or identity-based and crowd fueled attacks within Twitch chats. These affects travel and are conveyed differentially, depending on mediated form as well as audience, aim and corporate narrative of the platform, marking the dynamism of affects and their displays according to relevance of ideologies in a given space or platform.

While neoliberal and digital affects are communicated through different visual and textual means, they are all tied to and travel through perceived interconnectedness, or a sense of intimacy, a social imperative which has increased dialectically in tandem with and as a response to the rise of the digital medium as a space for both socializing and consuming. The perception of intimacy has become all the more relevant as digital interactions are mediated through multiple layers of separation. The perception of intimacy is achieved through the personalization of an experience, meaning that affect becomes tied to processes of individualization, in addition to how it functions contagiously in other contexts, such as analog crowds or the digital spread of viral content. The imbrication of intimacy, personalization and individualization with affective

exchanges and appeals is particular to digital transactions that rely on the unique or special qualities of the item purchased, the purveyor, or the relationship developed as the affective lifeline that keeps consumers coming back – particularly to platforms and spaces that do not provide an immediate or financial return on their investment. While affect is entwined with intimacy and authenticity in contemporary digital representations, relationships and transactions, this configuration may not be indicative of the entire, or a static, relationship between affect and the digital as much as reflective of the current conjuncture of these specific elements. It demonstrates that there are traceable neoliberal affects, and indeed affects that adhere to political economic as well as media forms.³ And, as with other social relations and norms that change with emerging and shifting ideologies, the way affect travels and manifests itself in sites of digital entrepreneurship can change as well. In this way, the current moment I am describing is reflective of a structure of feeling; the dominant form of digital affective engagements in areas of transaction may be authenticity and intimacy contemporarily, but the hegemony of authenticity may give way to emergent forms that negotiate or push back against these claims to sincerity. As will be seen in the example of Twitch, the live factor of streams and youthful demographic of users contributes to an undercurrent of sentiment among users that the authenticity within this platform is somehow less curated and more ‘real’ than the static and idealized self-presentations of sites like Etsy. The elements described here work together differentially in each iteration (Etsy, Kiva and Twitch, here)

³ Eugenie Brinkema (2014) argues that media forms have, and in fact are, affects as they can be coded into films or other media objects; media form structures affect.

depending on context to produce an affective matrix, or the constitutive formation of affect in each site or platform. Varying affective formations, or matrices, and similar affective appeals or discursive representations, can have different meanings and implications dependent upon cultural context as well as other factors; the contexts, or affective matrices, create different affective realities and iterations of ideological imperatives as well as representations and embodied experiences as will be examined in the following chapters.

As particular affective matrices, the prevailing themes of authenticity and intimacy and other constitutive neoliberal affects have a different valence in each chapter as, while related, they address particular ideological formations as well as corporate narratives and economic exchange models, such as direct buying and selling (Etsy), interest-free loans (Kiva), and voluntary subscriptions and donations (Twitch). Chapter One, “Etsy: Selling the Good Life” examines how the platform reflects the marriage of postfeminist and neoliberal ideological imperatives, within the context of late capitalism’s depreciation of full-time employment and social welfare. Encouraged to “be creative” and seek fulfillment within themselves by investing their whole selves in entrepreneurial projects, the typically white, heterosexual and female Etsy sellers embody gender re-traditionalization and the advent of consumer capitalism’s ‘freedom of choice,’ or liberation through aspirational consumption. Demonstrations of authenticity by sellers as well as buyers act as ideological stand-ins for the ‘good life’ vis-à-vis devalued feminized labor and affective exchanges, which provide sellers with the often aspirational *feeling* of being middle class, rather than with financial security; authenticity functions as

a brand shared by sellers on the platform since they are selling immaterial goods – feelings associated with the Etsy experience – as much as a unique handmade or vintage good. The products of Etsy, which are heavily imbued with a sense of individuality and connectivity, represent a connection to the ‘good life’ and the contemporary return to domesticity through an affective public that converges around literal and figurative happy objects and their association with happiness. The norms of Etsy’s affective public demand particular forms of self-representation and interaction, while aligning users with authenticity and the ‘good life’ – affective structures that are associated with privilege and being the ‘right’ kind of raced, gendered and classed individual (Wilson and Yochim, p. 244), which Etsy users presumably aspire to be.

Chapter Two, “Kiva: Selling Economic Empowerment” explores the deployment of neoliberal ideologies in transnational microlending vis-à-vis affective appeals which are premised on racial and economic difference and disparity, rather than similarity in pursuit of self-actualization. The reliance on difference between typically non-western borrowers and western lenders creates a hierarchical dynamic that obscures the role of global capitalism in subjugating non-Western populations in the first place, and microfinance’s part in trapping individuals in predatory loan cycles that perpetuate the cycle of poverty, while providing a space for Western lenders to tout the successes of free market capitalism. The affective public of Kiva is defined by the circulation of sentiments that affirm lenders’ dominant positionality and adherence to neoliberal ideologies that has led them to financial success or stability, while imagining that this same ‘success’ is possible for borrowers who appropriately perform Western values. In other words, this

public is particularly unidirectional, with borrower stories constructed for the benefit of Western lenders who do not directly engage with borrowers, but rather perform their own adherence to neoliberal ideologies in their profiles and directly engage with each other in competitive “team” models that encourage group lending.⁴ ⁵ Indeed, despite the non-profit’s claims of creating an inclusive community, Kiva does not directly connect people across the globe, nor does it necessarily lift impoverished (mostly female) borrowers out of poverty. Rather, Kiva operates to make lenders feel good about giving money to people in need, and having enough money, or comfortable life position, to do so in the first place, aligning them with ‘the good life’ vis-à-vis others’ disconnect from this fantasy. Creating more realistic engagements between parties would complicate this hierarchical dynamic, allowing lenders to see borrowers as complex individuals with dynamic lives and struggles – not just as affective vehicles.

Chapter Three, “Twitch: Selling Access and Exclusivity” considers the complete collapse of work and leisure in the fast-growing industry of livestreaming gameplay and audience interaction for donations and subscribers. While gaming has historically been understood as a leisure pastime, esports – a lucrative form of sportsmanship across digital games – has developed with the rise of digital connectivity in gameplay and has afforded this activity to be monetized as a site of labor. Streamers are expected to provide near

⁴ In the past, Kiva has operated similarly to other international charity models that provide donors with ‘updates’ from those they are helping, including photos and letters. This process was abandoned after a 2009 controversy over the organization’s lack of transparency regarding how loans are dispersed, which will be covered in Chapter Two.

⁵ In the past, Kiva has operated similarly to other international charity models that provide donors with ‘updates’ from those they are helping, including photos and letters. This process was abandoned after a 2009 controversy over the organization’s lack of transparency regarding how loans are dispersed, which will be covered in Chapter Two.

limitless access to not only their play across a variety of games and gaming systems, but their lives as well, while being held to rigid standards of traditional gender and exoticized racial performance by each other and their largely anonymous audience. These gendered expectations include the notion that women present as feminized sexual objects who compete for male attention, while male streamers must embody “geek masculinity,” or verbal aggressions and bravado tied to toxic masculinity. The demanding expectations from audiences open streamers to forms of harassment and violence, including doxing the digital publishing of private information about an individual and swatting, sending police and emergency response teams to another person’s address, usually with the expectation of a violent fallout. Twitch functions as a broad affective public with its own norms and codes of conduct, which become more particular and fine-tuned within individual channels where the streamer sets the tone for acceptable interactions and behavior, marking each channel as an affective micro public. Twitch relies on their streamers’ presence and consistent interactions with audience members to build their model and brand, as well as construct their ‘realness’. While Etsy and Kiva have negotiated their corporate identities and practices in order to remain relevant and profitable, Twitch is still determining its identity, which will become increasingly important as a milieu of e-sports and streaming services develops and the market expands.

2. Etsy: Selling the Good Life

Within the milieu of e-commerce sites, Etsy presents itself as an antidote to traditional shopping and the demands of corporate and consumer culture through its embrace of authenticity and affordance of opportunities for microentrepreneurs to pursue their passions and creativity in an affective public comprised of sellers and buyers. Rather than functioning as a self-evident identity, authenticity and its markers are produced as modes of self-representation that align, in this context, with Etsy's corporate narrative and the imagined values of its users, as well as dominant neoliberal ideologies. These markers are broadly feminized and aspirational, highlighting sellers' capacity to do what they love as demonstrated through passion and exuberance regarding their inherent creativity, their normative femininity and heterosexuality, their connection to ethnic heritage, and their pursuit of domestic bliss or the good life. The deployment of these markers of authenticity through sellers' affective labor fosters an affective public that coheres around shared sentiments reflecting the struggles and excitement of entrepreneurial pursuits as well as the ideological imperatives to take personal responsibility for one's individual socioeconomic position and embrace nonthreatening forms of identity-based diversity. The spaces of Etsy (Featured Shops, Community Posts, product reviews, shop descriptions and profiles) rely on feminine exuberance and

narrative similarity in framing each seller's 'journey' to Etsy and their creative fulfillment to maintain the intimate connection that mobilizes users as an affective public toward economic transactions.

Yet this pursuit of self-fulfillment and the 'good life' fails to overcome the breakdown of full-time, stable employment of post-Fordist neoliberalism, instead presenting these challenges through a contemporary feminized lens of postfeminism and attachment to its happy objects. Postfeminism touts the image of an empowered woman who embraces self-entrepreneurialism and self-fulfillment, both key aspects of Etsy's corporate narrative and the branding of its sellers, which align with contemporary expectations that individuals are both responsible for and find value in investing their full selves in employability. Such demonstrations of authenticity or alignment with neoliberal ideologies act as stand-ins for the good life vis-à-vis devalued feminized labor and affective exchanges, which provide sellers with the often aspirational *feeling* of being middle class, rather than financial security; the markers of authenticity function as a brand shared by sellers on the platform as they are selling happy objects or immaterial goods – feelings associated with the Etsy experience – as much as a unique handmade or vintage good. The products of Etsy, which are heavily imbued with a sense of individuality and connectivity, represent a connection to the good life and the contemporary return to domesticity (or New Domesticity) as their creation and purchase align buyers and sellers with traditional ideals of femininity, heteronormativity, and whiteness, which are so ubiquitous as to be invisible on the platform, with racial difference and fleeting examples of masculinity drawing nostalgic connections to an

exoticized heritage and reaffirming the normativity of white femininity, respectively. The norms of Etsy's affective public demand particular forms of self-representation and interaction, while aligning users with authenticity and the 'good life' – affective structures that are associated with privilege and being the 'right' kind of raced, gendered and classed individual (Wilson and Yochim, p. 244), which Etsy users presumably aspire to be.

Alongside shifts in labor forms, Etsy exemplifies the hallmarks of postfeminism, a cultural response to perceived gains of feminism, and which emerged alongside neoliberalism and market shifts of late capitalism, making its ideological constructs exceptionally situated for the growing emphasis on individualism. Postfeminism is defined by a naturalization of feminism and its supposed successes, which historicizes feminism as past and thus no longer necessary; an empowered consumer woman who is affluent and individualistic, as only certain privileged women are able to participate in consumer capitalism and reject particular professional demands while embracing other opportunities – namely self-entrepreneurialism and self-fulfillment; increased (real or sensed) freedom of choice regarding not only consumption but work, domesticity and parenting; and an increased emphasis on traditional gender roles, including domestic labor, intensive parenting, and femininity (Negra and Tasker, p. 2). Postfeminism is “exemplified by the figure of the white, middle-class, heterosexual woman” (Negra and Tasker, p. 15), or the Etsy seller, and certainly the featured Etsy seller; by emphasizing consumer culture and ‘choice,’ “postfeminism is thoroughly integrated with the economic discourses of aspirational, niche-market Western societies” (Negra and Tasker, p. 7), and

the culture of Etsy. Within this framework, “female achievement” is predicated on “female individualism” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 32) “as the old structures of social class fade away and lose their grip” and “individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 35), such as entrepreneurial endeavors, and particularly those that are home-based and embrace traditional forms of domesticity and femininity. Further aligning with neoliberal ideals, postfeminism relies on “individualized subjects” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 32) who reflect the conflation of “neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality, and family life... with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual, and kinship relations” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 24). In other words, the sellers of Etsy, as postfeminist subjects, embody a return to traditional ideals of femininity and appropriate gender roles (embracing domesticity), while benefiting from increased opportunities and ‘choice’ in life paths, all of which become depoliticized as feminism is reformulated as a past equality met.

This chapter will examine the constitutive parts of Etsy’s affective matrix that facilitate a connection between buyers and sellers and thus an economic exchange. I will begin by outlining how Etsy logistically operates, providing seller demographics and introducing the Featured Shop and Community Post profiles – the primary focus of analysis as sites of mediation and self-representation, as a foundation to argue that Etsy functions as an affective public that converges around happy objects and their ideological association with the good life. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to analyzing how the specific markers of authenticity are performed in both narratives and images,

constituting forms of affective labor on the part of all users, which encourage forms of intimacy and transactions. The analysis of these ideological markers follows the trajectory of their narrative presentation on the site in seller profiles: beginning with the happy objects – both literal and figurative – that are sold on the site before examining the ideological imperative to be creative, which segues to the discussion of sellers’ aspirational and formulaic ‘journey’ to Etsy and doing what they love. Following the analysis of how sellers arrive at Etsy, I will argue that the lack of discussion regarding sellers’ normative identities (femininity, heterosexuality and whiteness) illuminates their ubiquity to the platform and draws celebratory attention to the few instances of masculinity, queerness, or diversity vis-à-vis racial and ethnic heritage. Finally, I argue that sellers’ struggles and successes pursuing domestic bliss highlight the conflicting and myriad challenges faced by women who are attempting to navigate parenting, loneliness and work/life balance, all while engaging affective labor to engender economic exchanges.

Etsy’s corporate narrative distinctly emphasizes that anyone can be creative, encouraging users to sell handmade goods on the platform as opening a shop takes only “\$0.20 and an idea” – a notion that is misleading at best as Etsy does not exclusively, or even predominantly, sell handmade goods, nor do most sellers make a significant income from the platform. Started in 2005 and focusing on handmade and vintage goods, Etsy was built on the initial support of anti-corporate feminists and those seeking a more user and economically friendly marketplace than eBay. Etsy is now a publicly traded company (as of 2015) with a valuation of \$2 billion, and a new CEO who is a former eBay

executive. The company's IPO and replacement of the longstanding CEO Chad Dickerson who was a self-identified crafter with a cutthroat former competitor reflects many broad changes within the corporate culture of Etsy, the platform itself, and the shift to a dependence on the reputation of handmade goods produced by individual sellers, or "microbusinesses", more than their actual presence. Despite handmade products comprising the vast majority of available goods on the site (89.94% as of November 2018), crafting supplies (6.21% of items listed) consistently comprise the top sellers on Etsy, both in daily and overall sales (CraftCount, n.d.).⁶ Both former sellers and analysts have noted that this discrepancy within a site that touts itself as a handmade marketplace may be due to uneven labor costs as much as market saturation; supplies are easier to produce in mass quantities than a hand crocheted throw blanket. In fact, of the "handmade" goods on Etsy, most top shops sell stickers, digital prints, or other easily reproducible (and cheap to make and buy) items. In this way, "the current economic drivers of... [crafting] are not the crafters themselves but craft support companies whose business strategies often contradict the political ideals on which today's craft movement is built on" (Jakob, p. 127) and "most economic growth occurs in craft support (supplies, retail, marketing, training), rather than in the making of handmade items" (Jakob, p. 129). The success of supplies and the generally non-handmade within Etsy and wider craft culture belies Etsy's championing the human element of commerce, and instead its

⁶ Etsy charges a \$0.20 listing fee for all individual listings within each shop, takes a 5% sales fee (changed in 2018 from the longstanding 3.5%) (Paul, 2018) off the back end of a sale, and provides other seller services such as advertising platforms, payment processing, and shipping labels – all at a cost. Etsy takes no money from its approximately 35.8 million active buyers (as of 2018) or outside advertisers; it appears that all of their revenue stems from these charges incurred by the approximately two million active sellers (as of 2018), or shop owners.

reliance on the legacy of sustainability, the feminist craft movement, and “real human interaction” in the words of former CEO Dickerson (M. Brown, n.p.).

As I have already stated, Etsy sellers are predominantly women and the statistics bear out this claim as they comprise 87% of total sellers, with 80% running a one-person shop, and 97% from inside their home, bringing their experiences in line with shifts in the post-Fordist neoliberal landscape and Etsy’s own articulation of the significance of creativity and flexibility for contemporary women. Etsy frames its discussion of sellers and their experiences with a positive understanding of the flexibility required, or afforded, by the work of running an extremely small business, noting that, “The size of their creative business brings many benefits, like low overhead costs and a focus on rewarding, flexible, and imaginative work” and “Owning a creative microbusiness gives Etsy sellers the opportunity to pursue meaningful work that integrates with their lifestyle, assume greater autonomy, express their interests, and grow their creative skills—all hallmarks of the personal benefits of entrepreneurship” (“Meet Your Local Etsy Seller,” n.p.). Rather than framing selling on Etsy as an economic necessity wrought by the continuing effects of recession or a lackluster job market, the corporation frames the shift toward informal work as an opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills and live an autonomous life that is flexible and breeds creativity, bringing it in line with postfeminist ideals. Indeed, an “Outlet for Creativity” is a motivating factor for an average of 72.8% of U.S. sellers, with earning supplementary income and financial need a factor for 66.8% and 50% of sellers, respectively. It is unclear whether the instability of the informal economy has achieved these manifold goals, particularly as the majority of U.S. Etsy

sellers (51%) are part of the independent workforce, in addition to running their shop, which they typically dedicate just under 20 hours per week (17.8), on average (“Makers are Entrepreneurs,” n.p.). This might suggest that the flexibility of Etsy selling does not necessarily foster a creative environment so much as provide the flexibility necessary to women piecing together myriad forms of employment within a consistently unstable job market paired with a lack of affordable childcare.⁷ The sum of this Seller Census data reflects changes within the broader workforce, but its positive spin regarding sellers’ motivations may fail to capture the full range of experiences, as many female sellers note within their profiles and features that they began monetizing their hobbies while at home with a newborn baby, after or during a health crisis, or as an escape from the rigid expectations of corporate culture.

While there are undoubtedly a multitude of factors that bring sellers to Etsy, their experiences are typically distilled into a formulaic narrative within Featured Shop and Community Post profiles describing a journey that brought them to Etsy, highlighting key tropes (motherhood, dissatisfaction with a previous career, desire to pursue a creative outlet, etc.), and which are curated by Etsy staff to create a sense of intimacy and connection with the seller and their shop in order to encourage visitors to become buyers, buyers to become sellers, and sellers to continue selling.⁸ Direct interactions between buyers and sellers are largely limited to direct messages (only visible to each other)

⁷ Flexibility is a motivating factor for an average of 47% of sellers, with decreasing value each year of the Etsy Seller Census.

⁸ Analysis is primarily of Featured Shop profiles, as these are more outward facing to customers. Community Post features can be found in the digital Seller Handbook, meaning the primary audience is other sellers, not (potential) customers.

which are typically used to ask questions about products or discuss custom orders; public reviews of products from buyers; and team pages that allow sellers to engage with each other on numerous topics, marking the shop features and seller profile pages as primary means of (self-) representation for sellers.

The Featured Shops section of the Etsy blog highlights a different seller and shop each week, outlining their personal and professional ‘journey’ and detailing the labor and inspiration behind their handmade items, all within a formulaic format that condenses sellers’ experiences into palatable and aspirational stories.⁹ Divided into several categories that include “Style,” “Home and Living,” “Creativity,” and “Weddings,” each post consists of a combination of text relaying the seller’s story of Etsy selling, interspersed with 12 – 20 photos that feature either the owner, just the product, or the product being used or displayed by a model. A typical post begins with a product photo, then an attention grabber that may include a particularly unique element to their story, and a quick overview of the shop or seller before inviting the reader to ‘learn more below’. The remainder of the text is usually divided between discussing how they got into their craft (hobby, felt disconnected, needed extra income, already at home with a baby), their work process (labor and materials), perhaps their workspace or relationship with shop partner or employees and family, the role of social media (in newer posts), and in older posts, what they are looking forward to or how they hope to expand in the future. All of this text is broken up by a series of polished photos highlighting the seller, their

⁹ Data is derived from a sample of 41 Featured Shop profiles posted between April 2018 and January 2019, as well as 18 Community Posts published between February 2017 and January 2019.

products and their workspace. In some of the newer profiles, sellers are specifically asked about their relationships with customers, how they interact and what that relationship building means to them. Each of these features is framed in a positive and inspirational tone, marking one of the many ways the platform engages feminine exuberance and the affective labor of the sellers to produce excitement and investment from buyers.

While the Featured Shop profiles purport to describe a seller's individual experiences and showcase her unique goods, they follow a particular performative formula beyond layout, which is curated by Etsy staff to ensure a maximum return on the affective investment of sellers. Increasingly, "the public performance of the craft producer's personal identity as part and parcel of the consumer value chain of buying 'direct' from the maker – has become an essential part of the home-based maker's online marketing identity" (Luckman, 2016 p. 93). Not only are sellers encouraged to perform their *own* identity in features and personal profiles, the identities and narrative options available are increasingly narrowed to align with Etsy's brand and buyer expectations; they are performing the identity of "Etsy seller" as much as their own individual story. Etsy staff help sellers "craft" their stories, "equipping them with perhaps an editing lens, in terms of what really could be a good hook to catch the press on their end... or giving them just the confidence to be sharing more personal details" (Blanchflower, p. 179). Etsy staff are acutely aware of what will help market the sellers themselves, and thus draw buyers into a transactional relationship by creating an affective connection. The seemingly personal narratives are key to fostering a consumer relationship given the various layers of mediation between buyer and seller; there is no familiar storefront or

embodied merchant to greet shoppers, making the affective appeals of features and “About Me” sections even more significant. Yet, sellers do not write their own stories, choosing to frame themselves as individually as their products, but rather follow strict thematic and linguistic guidelines:

in the Etsy Featured Shop profile the narrative performance becomes tightly bounded, following a logic available for others to adopt. This is a combined life-career narrative presented putatively as a journey. But when the repetition of key motifs and the lack of individuality in the experiences becomes apparent, we can see how the conditions of post-Fordism and its institutions – old and new – themselves bring into being new models of career narrative to be adopted, embraced and internalized. These new narratives allow the individual’s multiple and *previously* competing pulls between work and family to be (apparently) happily reconciled (Luckman, 2016, p. 94).

When read in bulk, Featured Shop profiles become numbingly repetitive, demonstrating their adherence to internalized expectations of acceptable self-representation and successful brand identities. Not only does the profile create a unified narrative in which previously ‘competing’ obligations are happily combined, but it also belies the increasing commonality of this supposedly ‘individual’ narrative; more women are experiencing the same home and workplace struggles brought on by post-Fordist neoliberal shifts, but these become individualized as women are encouraged to see themselves *as individuals*, as having a particular experience which necessitates an individualized, and entrepreneurial response. By framing each ‘journey’ as an individual rather than

collective experience – marking it as an ideological construct, Etsy participants are encouraged to maintain individual connections with each other rather than acknowledge systemic experiences and collectively organize.

Featured Shop profiles demonstrate an individualized narrative despite shared seller experiences, while increasingly moving from an individual and relatively unmediated connection between reader and seller (as sellers used to write their own profiles) to a reliance on a perceived connection and intimacy as profiles have shifted to more overt focus on products and expanded the mediating capacities of Etsy staff writers. Shop profiles created between 2012 – 2016 were written by the seller themselves, providing readers with a more direct link to the seller, emphasizing *the individual* as the focus of the feature and a first-person connection with potential buyers, rather than the type of products they are selling. After introducing staff writers to tailor the posts and present them in an interview rather than personal essay format, the titling of posts changed as well (beginning in mid-October 2018) from a simple “Featured Shop: Title of Shop” format (i.e., “Featured Shop: Everli Jewelry”), to a more product and attention grabbing focus (i.e., “Perfect Fits for Petites from Elma Lingerie,” and “Modern Southwestern Jewelry from Sarah Safavi”). This change in wording, and emphasis on the product rather than the shop itself, is also reflected in the link image, which had exclusively been a photo of the seller in the past, but now is almost exclusively a product photo. These shifts represent Etsy’s overarching reprioritization of products over sellers, and overall sales over individual shops; products become the main focus as Etsy moves from focusing on artisans and their unique products and qualities to an artisan-inspired

shopping emporium. This reprioritization of products over sellers is akin to Karl Marx's formulation of commodity fetishism, in which goods are attributed with intrinsic value that obfuscates the human labor required for its creation – a concept that will be further explored in a following section as it is aligned with the production of happy objects as both commodities and ideological constructs.

Community Posts follow similar principles to Featured Shops regarding the individualization of sellers' stories, but fulfill slightly differentiated ideological imperatives as they are geared toward other sellers with the intent of encouraging them to continue selling and invest in themselves and their businesses, bringing the focus in line with neoliberal ideals of individualism and personal responsibility. Also written by Etsy staffers in interview format, Community Posts are divided into categories such as "Working Overtime," "Quit Your Day Job," "Inspiring Workspaces," and "Seller Spotlight," which reflect the motivating tone of the Seller Handbook overall, encouraging sellers to create aesthetically pleasing workspaces, "work overtime" and leave other employment behind in order to pursue Etsy full-time. Yet this overly optimistic tone obfuscates the exceptional amount of effort, capital, skill and business acumen, as well as assistance necessary in order to dedicate oneself full-time to a small business. As an example, many of the sellers featured in the "Quit Your Day Job" section have employees or production partners, as well as a professional background in their creative field, yet none of them state outright that more than one person handling all of the tasks is necessary to run a business; Etsy tends to frame it as one person's work by highlighting just one owner. By focusing on the positive and singular aspects of running a shop, the

posts create an affective appeal and aura of possibility while implicitly responding to the anxieties of maintaining a small business.

Featured Shop and Community Post profiles, along with individual sellers' profiles, public product reviews and direct messages contribute to the construction of an affective public, or a networked public that is defined by the circulation of shared and amplified affective sentiments, which facilitates connections between users and thus the selling of handmade goods. The consistent and even formulaic nature of features are crafted to engender excitement and empathy for sellers' products and their 'journey' toward living an authentic life, which, paired with sellers' own voices in their profiles and the affirmation from buyers in product reviews, ensures the circulation of shared affects that are amplified in their repetition. As users share sentiments and develop an empathetic investment in the stories of sellers, they foster connections with each other based on shared experiences and values and with the products that come to represent this intimacy. This process of affective expression and circulation that builds intimacy encourages buyers to become loyal to Etsy and its individual shops, and sellers to continue selling, as they are motivated by affective rewards. The economic chain of Etsy is sustained by an affective public that orients both sellers and buyers toward the good life and living an authentic life, through its aspirational markers of 'having it all' – passion, creativity, and domestic bliss.

The affective public orients Etsy users toward the good life through investment in ideological fantasies embodied in happy objects, or ideals and products that correlate to authenticity. Typically associated with "anything that we imagine might lead us to

happiness, including objects in the sense of values, practice, styles, as well as aspirations” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29), happy objects include the ideological markers of authenticity intrinsic to Etsy such as self-fulfillment through doing what one loves creatively and returning to domesticity by prioritizing the nuclear family, achieved by predominantly cisgender white women in heterosexual couples. The products of Etsy similarly function as *material* happy objects through their association with sellers and their stories; they are imbued with the same ideological fantasies and connections, allowing them to become tangible stand-ins for the seller and thus the authenticity they embody, which directly connect buyers to an authentic and good life. Similar to commodity fetishism, products are attributed with inherent value and capacities, but unlike Marx’s theorization, the labor of sellers is not necessarily obfuscated in this process, though their specific unhappy working conditions and lacking financial gains may be. Rather, sellers’ labor and creativity in producing unique handmade items are central to their story and Etsy’s appeal.

It is not only sellers’ creative labor that contributes to the construction of the affective public and circulation of happy objects, but also users’ affective labor seen in their passion and exuberance as expressed in feminine language and through the building of customer relationships and consistently positive (five-star) reviews from buyers. Feminine language is used by sellers and buyers alike to convey their passion and excitement for craft labor and products, which not only amplifies affective sentiments but also reflects how “the subject of post-Fordist work... are required to be normatively feminine” (McRobbie, 2016, p. 113) and take on “passionate work” in creative labor

markets which become “spaces for the deployment of highly normative femininity such as ‘girlish enthusiasm’, which can be construed as a willingness to work all hours for very little pay” (McRobbie, 2016, p. 110). Sellers consistently describe a deep love for their craft, framing it less as work or a job, and more as an integral part of themselves, which falls in line with the post-Fordist ideology that encourages investment in the self and simultaneously aligns them with the ideal of living authentically. The description of loving one’s work, and of how customers do as well, creates a passionate attachment to the happy objects that circulate through rhetorical and transactional exchanges:

What I like most about it is that I get to do what I love all day long. I can’t see myself doing anything else. There’s nobody here telling me what to do, how I should do it, or giving me deadlines. Everything gets done because I love to do it. We love managing our own time (Pelham Goods, quoted in Schneider, February 9, 2018, n.p.)

Greeting cards could have gone totally digital years ago, but people love giving and receiving handmade, printed cards. It’s about expressing a connection to friends, family, and community... In some of our shop reviews, customers will take the time to describe the feeling they got from a card, and why they’re excited to give it to a person in their life (Yeppie Paper, quoted in Steel, November 12, 2018, n.p.)

Yolande’s cheerful line of botanical art prints, animal-themed calendars, and playfully patterned greeting cards act as beautiful reminders that moments of peace and joy are all around us—even in the midst of a busy, bustling world (Buddie, December 24, 2018)

I like that my pieces are labors of love. I like that I am making them in my home, knowing that other people are going to use them in their homes. Because there are all these steps involved, I think it makes the finished piece even more special (Bonnie Kaye Studio, quoted in Schneider, October 22, 2018).

Sellers describe their labor through love, passion, and ideals such as family and community, bringing them in line with normative expectations of femininity as well as pursuit of self-fulfillment through creative labor and affective attachment to physical objects. Each of the objects described here are imbued with girlish femininity (“cheerful” or “playful”) and aligned with distinct sentiments such as nostalgia (“beautiful reminders”) or excitement to share such unique products with others. In prioritizing love and passion as creative pursuits, and idealistic connections to products, Etsy users participate in an “*affective structure* of an optimistic attachment [that] involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (Berlant, p. 2). By framing their work as ‘doing what they love’ over against other motivations, (the lack of) monetary gains are subsumed by ideological imperatives that promise the good life vis-à-vis proximity to authenticity. This affective labor contributes to the affective public and encourages relationships to be built between sellers and buyers on the basis of shared sentiments and ideological commitments.

Sellers also sustain the affective public and engage affective labor in their pursuits to build lasting customer relationships and not only maintain a loyal consumer base, but

to battle loneliness and benchmark their success through positive reviews and requests for custom products.¹⁰ Sellers' discussion of customer interaction and relationships are almost exclusively framed as positive, rewarding and fulfilling, as they are able to build relationships and provide custom products; sellers see customers as important collaborators in the creative process, understanding that buyers want not just any unique item, but one that has been developed specifically for them, and which they have a personal connection to. To that end, affective relationships are built not only between buyer and seller, but with the products as well, imbuing them with an affective charge and affirmation of Etsy as a site of authenticity and celebration of feminine success: "If happiness creates its objects, then such objects are passed around, accumulating positive affective values as social goods" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21). Understanding objects literally here, the collaborative creation of such products, or objects, by sellers who are self-fulfilled, points toward users' participation in and extension of the affective public of Etsy, defined in part by the individualization of the Etsy experience.

In addition to forms of affective labor and customer service, relationships with (potential) buyers act as stand-ins for the socializing sellers lack in their isolating work and key ways that sellers relate to and understand their own work as being fulfilling or successful. While some of the featured sellers discussed the positive impact that Etsy income had on their lives, the focus on financial success pales in comparison to their discussion of making others happy, an extension of the notion that "there is a necessary

¹⁰ Mentions of customer relationships and interactions were ranked seventh overall among the tracked variables in the coded sample and appeared exclusively as positive mentions within the Featured Shops profiles.

and inevitable relationship of dependence between one person's happiness and the happiness of others" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 9), or that one person's happiness will contagiously be spread to others. Sellers focus on how they are fulfilled by the validation and encouragement they receive from buyers and other sellers who pay them in relentlessly positive feedback and emotional connections as much as cash:

Collaborating with my customers makes me feel warm and fuzzy. Some of their stories are very, very personal... I cannot tell you how much meaning that brings to my own life and my work (Pebble & Stone, quoted in K. Brown, November 26, 2018, n.p.)

We love our customers, and sometimes my own family jokes that I know more about my customers than I do about them! I know their names, their children's names, and their life stories. Etsy is a fantastic platform to maintain those personal relationships. The community spirit is unique, and it feels like one big family (House of Baltic Linen, quoted in Steel, September 3, 2018, n.p.)

Recently, a lady wanted a custom piece for her sister who was about to have a child, so I rushed to complete it and get it delivered to her by Mother's Day. Her sister loved it, and it was very touching to be part of their special day. When customers give me positive feedback, when they give my jewelry to their wife or sister and email me to say they loved it, I feel like I've done my job well. That's how I define my success (Studio Cosette, quoted in Schneider, June 18, 2018, n.p.)

Having a creative business helps Lance develop even more tangible bonds. "The success of Wyldebyrd Art is all through emotional connections,

transparency, and authenticity,” he explains. “I connect with people and their stories, and that story we’re telling together attracts a lot of like-minded folks. It’s that goodness that lifts people up (Duncan, November 20, 2018, n.p.).

Each of these sellers note the very personal nature of their connections with customers (knowing their family members’ names or creating a custom design for a holiday), as well as the reciprocal affective charge (or “warm and fuzzy” feeling) they experience in making others happy. For these sellers, fulfillment is not just about doing what they love, but producing something that others will love and building a an “emotional connection” through that product. Perhaps in response to the perception of digital connections as inauthentic or impossible, these sellers perform their investment in these relationships, noting how personally involved and invested they become in their customers’ lives, becoming familiar with their life stories and particularities, and considering them part of an extended digital family, if not a niche affective public. Indeed, sellers (by their admission) read these emotive connections as indicative of their authentic and sustainable bonds, marking Etsy as more than just a transactional platform; it becomes a distinctive affective public.

The affective labor of and performative investment in the affective public is not limited to sellers, but is shared by buyers who leave consistently positive reviews. These often detail – in exaggerated and thus feminized exuberance – the significance of the personal connection they have made with sellers. In addition to reflecting the feminized and affective language of the sellers and the Etsy culture, the reviews had several other

shared features that reflected the buyers' investment in the buying process and relationship building with sellers, as well as the pressure to maintain a positive front. Notably, almost all of the reviews were five stars in the sample, and every single seller had an average of five-star reviews. Even the reviews which were critical of the goods or buying process were still either four or five stars and framed positively overall, with most reviews including a high frequency of emojis and exclamation points to denote excitement. Some buyers also critically considered the buying experience to be a collaborative creative process *with* the seller, rather than simply a monetary transaction:

super cool and beautiful! love it, though luckily i didnt have to think about putting it together myself as i'm used to crafting. it takes quite some time and accuracy if you want it to look nice in the end, so dont order if you're all thumbs!!! (thus minus one star, otherwise 5 stars!) ("Most Likely Shop," n.p.)

Beautiful earrings!! Love the colour, exactly how pictured if not better! Fast delivery and beautiful packaging. Will be buying from here again. Thanks :) ("Each To Own," n.p.)

I ordered a custom cut and it came EXACTLY how I pictured it! Karen was very accommodating and I received my map super quickly, even though I ordered it so close to Christmas! if I could leave more than 5 stars, I definitely would! ("Studio KMO," n.p.)

This bracelet is fantastic! I purchased it for my girlfriend for Valentine's Day. The handwriting came from her grandmother, who just recently passed away. Her eyes welled up with tears because the bracelet is a

carbon copy of her grandmother's cursive. Thank~you so much for this piece! (“Caitlin Minimalist,” n.p.)

While I never leave reviews (even for things I love-- shame! Everlasting shame!), I feel compelled to tell you just how great this shop is and what a joy it is to work with Sarah. Look no further! Stop scrolling now. If you want beautiful, fairly priced, handcrafted jewelry and a pleasant buying experience, this is your shop. You've found it! (“Sarah Safavi Jewelry,” n.p.).

In addition to using feminine words such as “love,” “lovely,” “beautiful,” “perfect,” and “cute” to describe the products and experience, reviewers frequently used exclamation points and various emojis to convey their satisfaction, demonstrating that kind words alone are not enough to convey their overwhelming and affectively excessive feelings of joy regarding the process; reviewers seem challenged to compete to be the *most* satisfied with their purchase, the most grateful for the experience, or the most excited to enjoy their product. Such performances of exuberance and extreme happiness highlight buyers’ (in addition to the previously discussed sellers’) pressure to participate in an affective public defined by the exchange of happy objects – understood as both commodities and ideals. Buyer reviews and seller (self-) representations also evince how the performative nature of their interactions extend beyond authenticity and happiness to include the normatively feminine, if not also girlish (as seen through extensive use of exclamation points, emojis, and purposefully incorrect grammar). Feminized performances of buyer reviews and seller features, as forms of affective labor, fortify the affective public of Etsy

alongside the circulation of happy objects which can take the form of both physical products and intangible ideals that align users with the ideological constructs that mark authenticity on the platform.

As I have previously noted, authenticity is not a self-evident identity, but rather its markers are produced as modes of performative self-representation that align both with dominant neoliberal ideologies and Etsy's corporate narrative. In addition to passion and exuberance, users perform the role of a creator who has gone on an individual 'journey' to doing what they love through Etsy and embracing domesticity, which is typified by white cisgender heterosexual women. Despite their individualized presentation, each seller's 'journey' is decidedly formulaic and generally limited to those women in a relative position of privilege, with the few examples of people of color or queerness celebrated as nonthreatening forms of diversity. Each of these stories reifies ideological expectations that neoliberal citizens take personal responsibility for their socioeconomic position and see their experiences in seeking forms of flexible employment and supplemental income as distinctly individual – not as part of a larger shift in labor forms. Yet, as this experience is widely shared, and presented in Etsy as an aspirational trajectory toward self-fulfillment, users affirm both ideological constructs and their coinciding sentiments in an affective public defined by this journey toward authenticity and the good life.

Home-based creativity has become a guiding feminized ideological imperative as well as an economic coping strategy for numerous women, particularly with the growing accessibility of digital marketplaces such as Etsy. Engaging in crafting as a home-based

entrepreneurial pursuit is also highly individualized, operating as “both a cost-saving or a re- or up-cycling activity and a high-end leisure pursuit” with “historical association[s] with austerity practices of ‘make do and mend’... the handmade offers a reprise, an alternative” to mass-production and the alienation of corporate labor outside of the home (Luckman, 2015, p. 23). Indeed, while “in the absence of satisfying jobs, educated young people are looking for a way to express their creativity and individuality” (Matchar, p. 79), the turn to creativity has emerged not solely as a collective embrace of innate artistry, but rather as a *dispositif* that encourages self-entrepreneurialism and personal responsibility, bringing it in line with neoliberal ideals. The creativity *dispositif* functions positively, encouraging individuals “to discover one’s own capabilities, to embark on a voyage of self-discovery” in which “insecurity is seen as part of the adventure” and not a systemic issue inherent to such unstable pursuits (McRobbie, 2016, p. 15). Rather, by pursuing their own self-fulfillment, “home-based creative enterprise is interpellating relatively privileged women of the global West with promises of economic and personal empowerment and family-friendly choice” (Luckman, 2015, p. 11), despite the implausibility of achieving such success; the ideological imperative to be creative functions as a *promise*, a fantasy, of the good life rather than a map to its achievement.

Sellers rarely discuss their work with Etsy as labor, choosing rather to frame their experience as a journey of self-fulfillment that has allowed them to embrace their identity as a creator and (full-time) entrepreneur, even as this ‘journey’ ironically takes place either completely in the home, or leads them there. As previously noted, the sharing of these similar stories consolidates the affective public and facilitates the development of

professional and personal relationships. This formulaic narrative structure also serves the purposes of encouraging buying and the opening of new Etsy shops, within the confines of neoliberal rhetorics of personal responsibility and individualism, as well as aforementioned ideological imperative to be creative. Noting one's creativity or their capacity to create was one of the most prevalent themes across sampled posts, marking the significance of this identification for sellers as inherent to their personhood, while also serving as a cathartic experience with the capacity to bring long-term success:¹¹

Making my work is like therapy. My creativity saves my life on a daily basis—I know that sounds dramatic, but I feel incredibly fortunate (Tamara Gomez, quoted in Keeler, September 24, 2018, n.p.)

I find that creating is a form of meditation for me and it helps maintain a balance in my life (LithopsStudio, quoted in Schneider, August 13, 2018, n.p.)

My favorite part of the whole process is painting. That's who I am at my core; that's my happy place (Yeppie Paper, quoted in Steel, November 12, 2018, n.p.)

I kind of got in a rut; I love being a mom, but I felt like, as a creative person, I still needed to have some kind of creative outlet to thrive. That's

¹¹ The terms "creative," "creativity," and "create" were overall the most prevalent tracked variable for Community Posts, appearing 319 total times across the various posts, or an average of 4.1 mentions per post. Creative/creativity/create was the second most prevalent for Featured Shops (following "love"), appearing a total of 153 times, or an average of 3.9 mentions per post. More than family, gender, or previous/other employment (the other variables in the top five frequency), creativity and creating seems to define the Etsy experience and their own self-identification for sellers.

when I sat down to figure out what I could make in just an hour or two a day, to have a moment for myself and do something artistic (Szklo Glass, quoted in Rains, January 7, 2019, n.p.)

Fast forward 6 years (marriage & 2 kids), I was pregnant with our third & I had a major itch to start creating again. I tried thinking of everything or anything I could start learning to make. It finally hit me one day, why not use a skill I already know so well (Szklo Glass, n.d.).

In each of these instances, the sellers describe how embracing and finding an outlet for their innate sense of creativity makes their lives whole and fulfills them in ways that other duties and identities, such as motherhood and family, cannot. Both Tamara Gomez and the owner of LithopsStudio describe creating as therapeutic, or life-saving and meditative, while the owner of Szklo Glass describes creativity as a way to take time for herself and thrive. Selling handmade goods online is not merely an opportunity to earn supplementary, or sustainable, income for these sellers, but rather reflects a deeper need to be creative, or to fulfill themselves outside of the expectations of domesticity, while importantly doing something for *themselves*. While this creative drive may reflect a genuine quality within these women and a feminist reclamation of the domestic sphere and self-identification outside of domestically affiliated roles, it can also be read as aligning sellers with *postfeminist* demands to return to the domestic sphere and embark on individualized self-fulfillment through investment in the whole self as a site of entrepreneurialism, along with the ideological incitement to “be creative,” through which individuals are encouraged to develop and deploy creative skills in an all-encompassing

entrepreneurial project. The ideological imperative functions as a form of common sense here, “becom[ing] something inherent in personhood... which has the potential to be turned into a set of capacities” (McRobbie, 2016, p. 11) that, through a “mix of pleasure and discipline” (p. 13), encourages entire swaths of people to abandon traditional employment in the pursuit of their ‘passions’ or ‘self-fulfillment’, which simultaneously allows for the dismantling of welfare entitlements, as Etsy sellers (and other platform-based workers) are not considered employees of the corporation who would be eligible for the benefits of employment.

The narrative of sellers’ journey to Etsy and the platform’s remunerative capacities is further solidified by consistent discussions of transitioning to selling on Etsy full-time, a further marker that sellers are living a self-fulfilling life of creative pursuits. Despite the fact that more than half of Etsy sellers (51%) are independent contractors outside of their crafting, with another 34% working full-time in other capacities, leaving only 30% of sellers full-time on Etsy and 18.47% of sellers making enough money to support themselves, narratives of the opportunities afforded by Etsy abound, encouraging women to “Quit Your Day Job” and embark on this path.¹² In addition to avoiding how unlikely it is to support oneself selling goods on Etsy, these inspirational posts also obfuscate the myriad skills and capital necessary to start a business; many of these sellers’ employment histories and skillsets translate directly into their crafting and business management abilities, meaning that there is a higher barrier to entry than just

¹² These statistics are taken from the most recent seller census, which surveyed 2,658 U.S.-based sellers from April to May of 2018.

“\$0.20 and an idea”. These sellers also ignore the less sexy aspects of running a business – business plans, tax information, working with suppliers, etc. – and focus rather on “creating” and being fulfilled, which also belies the knowledge and education necessary to run a successful business. By highlighting the creative and lucrative aspects of the work, to the detriment of the business acumen required, affective engagement of the readers takes precedence over the practical, as sellers (and Etsy editors) attempt to build relationships and encouragement through emotive responses to features of feminized labor rather than the dry, masculinized labor of business management:

When the first map sold, I got so many requests coming in for different cities. Luckily, it was a good moment for me to stop working for my firm, so I left my job and have been working on Studio KMO full-time ever since. It has kept me that busy for nine years! I can’t believe I’ve been doing these maps that long, but it’s really fun (Studio KMO, quoted in A. Brown, December 10, 2018, n.p.)

After about six months on Etsy I was creating a full-time income for myself with my own hands. I hope my customers know that when they buy something from me, they’re helping someone small, someone who is doing this out of her passion for art, people, and the beauty of the natural world (Pebble & Stone, quoted in K. Brown, November 26, 2018, n.p.)

And now I do this full-time and overtime! And make more than enough to support us now. I still remember that moment when I made my first sale. Oh my god, it was so cool! I didn’t know the app made that “cha-ching” sound. I was sitting at my desk and I was sewing things and my phone

started “cha-ching”-ing. I actually jumped and almost cut my fabric (Random Rompers, quoted in Duncan, July 18, 2017, n.p.)

Shuang began taking classes on the weekend and tinkering with ideas in her free time, then started selling her pieces on Etsy. Next, she scaled back her day job to a freelance role, giving her more time to develop designs with her financial safety net intact. But after two years, she felt ready to take a bigger step, quitting her day job and officially launching Everli in 2014. Nerve-wracking as that decision was, it ended up fueling Everli’s purpose: to make jewelry that serves as a tangible source of courage and calm, and that emboldens others to take big, life-changing leaps of their own (Gugliemetti, October 8, 2018).

Both the owners of Studio KMO and Pebble & Stone discuss their rapid shift to selling on Etsy full-time, which allows them to have fun and express their passions, while Shuang, the owner of Everli, is described as ‘fueling her purpose’ and her products as literally encouraging others to make similar life-changing steps – a straightforward usage of tangible happy objects to connect users to the *ideals* of happiness. Shifting from affective engagements toward readers, the story of Krystal, the owner of Random Rompers, speaks to the affective rewards of Etsy selling; she notes the “cha-ching,” or cash register, sound that the Etsy app makes upon a sale which reflects the immediate, and deliberate, reaction that sellers can receive from making a sale, and how the initial “cha-ching” encourages them to sell more, continuously seeking this affective high. As an Etsy seller myself, I can attest to the affirmation of the “cha-ching”; I immediately identified with Krystal’s experience, as I did not know that the Etsy seller app had a

separate alert for sales, until I was surprised by my own first sale one day. Undoubtedly, other sellers who read this post from the Seller Handbook may share this sentiment, and connect with Krystal's experience, further affirming the affective public through shared sentiment and experience. Krystal's discussion of her embodied, affective relationship with her selling app and experience reflects the myriad ways Etsy attempts to engage both sellers and buyers on an affective level. Yet the collective narratives of these sellers represent a minority experience within the Etsy selling platform, where most do not sell full-time, and certainly are not able to do so within mere months of opening their shop. Nonetheless, these sellers, and Etsy, frame their experiences as typical, highly emotional and fulfilling.

As I have hinted at thus far, the capacity to pursue one's creative capacities and sell on Etsy full-time is largely limited to those in a position of relative privilege – cisgender women who have preexisting skillsets and financial (if not production) assistance from their typically heterosexual partners. Unlike other markers of authenticity on the platform, heterosexuality and femininity are invisible in both their ubiquity and alignment with prevailing gender norms, as seen through consistent descriptions of heterosexual relationships as an idealized image of the good life and postfeminist essentialized femininity, with fleeting examples of non-heteronormativity celebrated as historicized gains of feminism that point to its expired utility. These neoconservative notions are affirmed through images that reinforce normative femininity as well as masculinity through the few featured shops that are owned by men or heterosexual couples. With heterosexuality and its attendant gender roles so pervasive as to be nearly

invisible on the platform, it is clear that it is difficult “to separate images of the good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledness, as well as in the idealization of domestic privacy... Heterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 90). In other words, consistent demonstrations of heterosexual bliss through narratives and imagery point toward attainment of the good life and the circulation of this possibility through the network of the affective public.

Seller features affirm traditional gender roles through consistent descriptions and imagery of gendered products and the heterosexual nuclear family, with the limited departures from the norm serving to both reinforce normative expectations and the celebration of ‘diversity’ in narrow neoliberal market terms (Duggan, p. 21). Products are presumed to be designed specifically for men or women in mind (no matter their unisex capacities), and women are assumed to embody motherly characteristics while men are breadwinners:

“I wanted to give Nikita a robe as a gift, but all of the ones I found were terry and plush,” Ann recalls. “I wanted his to be comfortable, lightweight, and to make him to look handsome—not like a teddy bear”... Today, Ann and Nikita’s desire to understand the full entrepreneur journey—and to create a flattering, masculine robe—has blossomed (Black Ficus, quoted in Rains, May 28, 2018)

Quality sewing requires time and patience. I make my choices the way a mother would, and consider every little detail. Sewing linings takes a lot

of time, but I won't compromise the kids' comfort (Inbal Carmi, quoted in K. Brown, September 17, 2018)

By Beardbangs' one-year anniversary, Alicia was earning a salary-level income from her Etsy shop. She now runs the business with the help of an assistant, while Josiah works on a master's degree in divinity. Last year, Alicia opened a community studio space, where she offers classes and makes her products. With the steady income from more than 1,675 sales and a loyal customer base, Alicia and Josiah have been able to switch roles as providers – a game-changer for the couple (Schneider, March 28, 2017, n.p.).

Much the way Mademoiselleyo's flowery products were described earlier and femininely as "cheerful" and "playful," robes are imbued here with masculinity and the ability to make a man feel handsome, rather than "like a teddy bear". The assumption of essentialized gender continues in Inbal Carmi's description of her inherent qualities of motherhood – presumed to be shared by any mother, and the seemingly positive way that Beardbang's heterosexual owners have managed to "switch roles as providers." These narratives typify postfeminist ideologies as traditional gender roles are reinvigorated and women are celebrated for their capacity to act as earners; while ideal for women to be in the home raising a family, departures are understood as positive ventures into entrepreneurialism and fulfilling neoliberal aims rather than need-based responses to job market shifts or steps to dismantle such limiting expectations.

The ubiquity of gender norms and their re-traditionalization, which serve as markers of sellers' 'authentic creative journey', is reinforced through images that

highlight the performance of masculinity and femininity as distinct spaces for male and female bodies, respectively, with concomitant products and their advertisement affirming gendered divisions and heterosexuality. Images present masculinity and femininity within a binary, with features of female sellers typically using soft lighting, pastel colors, and focusing on their whimsical and colorful products, while features of male sellers use dark and muted lighting to highlight their industrial workspaces and products. Jordan Grace Owen's profile focuses on her custom paper doll creations – with each example featuring a heterosexual family, while the owner of Wyldebyrd Arts showcases his wares all created from aeronautical castoffs, a differentiation in product and feature that affirms the supposed binary division between genders. The modeled clothing for Beacha Swimwear and Black Ficus follow similarly gendered disparities, with the female model wearing the brightly colored suit over her idealized body type and smiling nonchalantly, while the male model for Black Ficus' clothing sits in an all-gray room, lounging in his muted tone clothing, staring seriously away from the camera. These images typify the performance of binary divisions between genders within Etsy features and shops, affirming and normalizing the ideological construct that there are only two genders that have distinct presentations and roles – particularly within the home.



Figure 1. Jordan Grace Owens



Figure 2. Wyldebyrd Art



Figure 3. Beacha Swimwear



Figure 4. Black Ficus

Only two features profiled members of the LGBTQ+ community, reifying the invisibility of the norm against which they are defined and lack of diversity on the platform, as well as the encouragement of empowerment through consumption and a fetishization of non-normative gender identity and sexual orientation. In each of these fleeting instances, the departure of sellers from gendered and sexual expectations is only secondary to their role as entrepreneurs, and specifically an entrepreneur of the self, investing their full capacity and identity into their labor:

I love to work. In addition to running The Small Object, I also have freelance illustration clients, which means I'm pretty much working straight through the day, until six or seven at night. My wife is in graduate

school, and after we eat dinner, we both go back and work again for a bit (The Small Object, quoted in Steel, June 11, 2018)

“My items are about owning your identity and not being afraid to be who you are... I want my brand to help people come together to support one another” ... It’s very intentional that I describe Double Denim Dude as a queer-owned shop, because I want to be authentic as a voice for the LGBTQ+ community (Double Denim Dude, quoted in Duncan, June 19, 2018, n.p.).

While the owner of The Small Object notes her non-heterosexual partner in passing, the remainder of her narrative reflects adherence to postfeminist neoliberal ideals, including feminized passion for her work (which she “loves”), and a capacity to work extensive hours for little pay, as well as the notion that feminism’s work is done, as queer women are now accepted as neoliberal subjects. This notion is further affirmed by her feature photos, which include a Lambda Legal wall hanging proclaiming “LOVE RULES” behind her while she works – the only other fleeting reference to her non-heterosexual identity. As the owner of Double Denim Dude, Sam’s discussion of their identity and work more overtly ties empowerment to consumption as they use the exacting language of “owning” one’s identity, which is supposedly possible through purchasing items that are specifically tied to self-identification and celebration of LGBTQ+ identities. They likewise note that their goal is to be an “authentic” voice for the LGBTQ+ community, tying self-identification and entrepreneurialism directly to authenticity and living the good life, as well as literal and figurative happy objects. By purchasing an LGBTQ-

themed product from Double Denim Dude, buyers are assured that they are aligning themselves with the neoliberal value of celebrating diversity as well as straightforward displays of ‘authenticity’. Both of these instances fall in line with neoliberal sexual politics, or homonormativity, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, p. 50).). The owner of The Small Object performs a narrative typical of heterosexual couples on the platform, affirming the nuclear family as well as passionate work and a return to domesticity, while Double Denim Dude’s narrative assures readers that support of LGBTQ+ causes can be demonstrated not through political activism, but consumption; by purchasing an item from this seller, buyers are affirming the representation of non-normative identities in micro-entrepreneurial spaces and their likewise positioning as postfeminist neoliberal subjects who are associated with the ‘right’ kind of politics through proximity to authenticity and its objects.



Figure 5. The Small Object



Figure 6. Double Denim Dude

Heterosexual relationships and gendered product descriptions offer an idealized image of the good life and postfeminist essentialized femininity while affirming binary divisions of gender. As will be further explored in a following section, the construction of the normative nuclear family likewise functions as a happy object that binds Etsy users together (Ahmed, 2010, p. 45) as an affective public that shares ideals and the expression of sentiments, encouraging their affirmation through the purchase of products that are similarly imbued with these qualities. While a departure from these norms, LGBTQ+ identities do not call them into question, but rather affirm them while celebrating the inclusivity of difference as a success of postfeminism and neoliberal forms of tolerance. Nonnormative identities expand the reach of the affective public and its celebratory sentiments, but do not question norms or Etsy's consistently positive affective tendencies.

Much the way heterosexuality is a taken for granted norm that is rarely discussed on the platform, whiteness is never mentioned as such, with acknowledgements of race and ethnicity exclusive discussed as markers of authenticity vis-à-vis bridges to ethnic heritage and exoticized cultures, or, celebrations of black female achievement through entrepreneurialism and commodification of their identities. None of the sellers in the sample overtly discussed racism, either demonstrated by individuals or on a systemic level, but self-identified black women did broadly discuss the challenges faced by women of color, how they may be viewed differently because of their race, and the continued importance of promoting acceptance through their shop. Nearly all mentions of ethnicity by sellers focused on the ways that they felt connected to their heritage and a desire to convey this idealized connection to buyers through consumption. By eliding political struggles for identity-based rights and situating racial and ethnic identity claims within the parameters of consumption, Etsy and its sellers affirm neoliberalism's and postfeminism's positioning of such issues as cultural rather than economic and in the past; challenges faced by women of color are assumed through neoliberal logic to be outside the realm of economics (Duggan, p. xiv), where they are able to participate in the commodification of difference as depoliticized entrepreneurs – much like LGBTQ+ sellers (Negra and Tasker, p. 8).

Typical discussions of ethnic heritage in features serve as a way to connect sellers and buyers to their products, claiming an imagined past and continued association with the circulation of objects imbued with exoticized authenticity through sellers' performance of their ethnic identities and their anticipated qualities. In each of these

instances, ethnicity and heritage are used not only to mark the relationship of the seller to the product, but reinforce a ‘safe’ commoditized (Euro) ethnicity:

As far as my company name, my father’s lineage is Polish & I became very interested in my family history. When I heard the Polish word for glass, I knew it was the one. That’s how Szklo Glass was born! (Szklo Glass, n.p.)

When Adriana Coppola of A&A Alta Cucina launched her line of artisanal olive oils, balsamic vinegars, and tomato sauces, her goal was to bring a taste of the food culture she grew up with in her native Italy to her young family’s new home in the US (Keeler, November 19, 2018, n.p.)

Our family roots reach one of the oldest countries in Europe – Lithuania. Through our language and culture we are still able to maintain vital relationships with our motherland. Our own childhood memories are infused with delicate aroma of linen. Growing surrounded by beautiful linen things, hearing folk songs about linen our mums used to sing, we developed almost sacred relationships towards linen (House of Baltic Linen, n.p.).

The owner of Szklo Glass provides clarity and the sign of ethnic origin to secure a sense of authenticity to an otherwise potentially alienating shop name, while the owner of Alta Cucina overtly attempts to bring a part of Italian culture and history to the United States. Doville, the owner of House of Baltic Linen, takes this linguistic and cultural connection further, describing an embodied and emotional relationship not with her home country, but to linen specifically, which she associates with her time there. By discussing the

aroma of and folk songs about linen, its warmth and comfort, and describing an emotional and “sacred” relationship with the fabric, Doville fetishizes the product, elevating it to a position of exaltation and anthropomorphized worship; by drawing the reader into proximity of this happy object, they are encouraged to experience the affective pleasure conveyed by this dramatized and embodied description. These sellers use performative narrative appeals to draw on their commoditized (Euro) ethnic heritage and create affective ties with buyers and amplify positive sentiments toward diversity throughout the affective public.

The emotional connection to an imagined past is similarly present in feature images, which attempt to highlight cultural differences vis-à-vis home-working. While the majority of photos in A&A Alta Cucina’s profile feature the owner Adriana working in an industrial kitchen, her cover (or primary) photo shows her in a home kitchen, surrounded by fresh ingredients and an active workspace behind her, inviting the reader to imagine this is where she creates her recipes – an overtly performative and constructed, though more seemingly authentic, display than the harsh lines and colors of an anonymous industrial kitchen. The feature for PataPri is found within the “Inspiring Workspaces” category of Community Posts and highlights how the screenprinter is influenced by her surroundings, as evinced by numerous images of her traditionally decorated and designed Japanese home, which confers a sense of exoticized authenticity. These images, among many others, reinforce sellers’ claims to authenticity through their heritage, which is then imbued onto their products and available to consumers as markers

of their investment in authenticity and their own pursuit of the good life through consumption of happy objects.



Figure 7. A&A Alta Cucina



Figure 8. PataPri

Alternatively to drawing affective ties to both ‘safe’ and exoticized heritage as forms of authenticity, discussions of race by black female sellers are more complex as they obscure the history of racism and slavery (positioning those struggles as specifically in the past) while simultaneously distancing themselves from their racial and ethnic identities for fear of being “too black” on a platform that reflects mainstream society’s racist assumptions of the affectively excessive qualities of black womanhood. Black sellers’ racial or ethnic identity is rarely discussed as an obstacle, as constructed by systems of inequality, or anything else other than a way for consumers to relate to them and their products on a visceral level; the positive reformulation of histories of struggle as commodities reflects the manifold pressures on black women as racially marked

entrepreneurs who are tasked with creating happy objects, rather than those that alienate buyers:

I started selling on Etsy with a product that I loved and aspired to learn more about, in terms of the African Ankara print, because I'm originally Jamaican and I can trace my lineage to Ghana. As a member of the diaspora, it's a way for me to learn more about my culture. And now, to be in the process of merging that culture with my current interest in stretch fabrics, and with my Caribbean heritage and other indigenous cultures, I feel like I'm in a really good place (Omi Woods, quoted in Rains, February 28, 2018, n.p.)

I love drawing all types of girls. I don't want to be a black artist who only draws black people – I draw everyone. I have all kinds of friends, and I believe everyone deserves to be represented. I want to be inclusive (Lovely Earthlings, quoted in A. Brown, July 2nd, 2018, n.p.)

I think that's how it started for me with making cards. When I was growing up, if I wanted to buy a card showing someone who looked like me, it would either be very religious, or African-themed. Which, okay, yes, I know at some point I came from Africa, but it almost felt too cultural. Maybe one day I'll have a daughter, and I want her to see herself in common things like cards. I don't want her to have to go to a special flea market all the way in Harlem to find them. They need to be normal – as normal as everything else (Lovely Earthlings, quoted in Brown, July 2nd, 2018, n.p.).

Ashley (the owner of Omi Woods), like others noted above, describes her racial and ethnic heritage as a way that she is able to connect to her culture through her craft (and buyers, in turn). Yet her passing mention that she is a member of the diaspora, and implied reference to slavery in her statement that she can “trace [her] lineage to Ghana” carefully avoid the ugly history of slavery and rather reposition these connections as ways that she is able to demonstrate her authenticity and commodify her experiences as a postfeminist neoliberal subject. Karina, the owner of Lovely Earthlings, alternatively struggles to balance these competing demands, noting that by drawing exclusively African themes or women of color, she would be “too cultural” (or too black) to succeed as a mainstream entrepreneur, marking her niche items as limited to black audiences. Karina takes pains to note that while she identifies as a black artist, her work is not limited to representing black people; it is important to her that she be identified as inclusive, and as participating in a broader project of representation. Karina reaffirms the importance of a neoliberal sense of diversity – a depoliticized version of representation that encourages visibility without systemic change, and which seeks not to offend potential buyers. This justification of her presence on Etsy and defense that she and her work are not ‘too’ black, is in juxtaposition to white sellers who do not mention racial inclusivity or representation in their craft at all, as they are not forced to account for themselves or the work their products are doing in the cultural landscape; black women are “not even entitled to be proximate to the fantasy [of the good life], though they may be instrumental in enabling others to approximate its form” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 51). In other words, white Etsy sellers do not need to justify their presence on Etsy, or their

pursuit of the good life, and the very fact that black women must work to embody this position of authenticity further removes them from its possibility while aligning white women with the good life.

Black female Etsy sellers' concern that they be read as 'too cultural' and must justify their presence on the platform is borne out by their representation in images that accompany their narratives in features. Photos included for Omi Woods' feature focus on textiles and patterns, as the seller discusses how her African and Caribbean ties influence her design choices, which she believes "empower" women. Such narrative and pictorial overtures further justify the authenticity of the seller as part of the African diaspora *and* legitimate her presence on Etsy while using that connection to engender a transactional relationship with consumers. Alternatively, despite the owner of Lovely Earthling's attempts to distance her shop from being pigeonholed as an exclusively black space, nearly all of her profile photos are of products featuring black women and girls, proving that despite her attempts, she is still read within the limited space of Etsy as specifically a black artist. The poorly lit outdoor photo of the shop's owner, Ashley, also conveys the incongruity of her presence on the platform; she appears washed out and awkwardly highlighted, reinforcing through technological means the assumption of whiteness in photography (Dyer, 1997) and in the postfeminist space of Etsy.



Figure 9. Omi Woods



Figure 10. Lovely Earthlings

The justification of black women's presence on a platform defined by depoliticized feminine whiteness is unsurprising, given black women's historical association with anger, which can be understood not only as unpleasant affectively but an unhappy object that circulates negativity, and the treatment of women of color who attempt to politicize such unhappy associations (Ahmed, 2010). I did not observe any racial antagonism or descriptions of politically divisive products, which, in their absence, may point to Etsy's (and potentially its users) fear of acknowledging that racial difference is not simply something to be celebrated, but part of a more complex system of structural inequalities that cannot be rectified simply through consumption of 'exotic' patterns and celebration of the diaspora. One example that supports this possibility and has gained media attention is that of Olatiwa Karade, who opened an Etsy shop called Splendid Rain Co. in response to the 2016 U.S. presidential election and sold clothing emblazoned with all-caps, unadorned text such as "COLUMBUS WAS A MURDERER," "PRO-BLACK/ANTI-BULLSHIT," and "FUCK YOUR RACIST GRANDMA" (L. Anderson, 2018). Karade's shop became wildly popular in 2017, with features in Buzzfeed and Huffington Post, among other outlets (L. Anderson, 2018). Yet in September 2018 she released a statement to her more than 10,000 followers on Instagram that Etsy had shut down her store, ostensibly because it had become "too controversial" and Etsy had caved to outside boycotts which called for her removal (L. Anderson, 2018). Before her shop was closed, Karade noted numerous issues with the company, such as a denial of free advertising, Etsy's failure to address issues such as racial slurs she had received in direct messages, and "removal of her store's listings while other Etsy sellers continue[d] to sell her

designs” (L. Anderson, 2018). While Karade briefly reopened her shop, which remained unavailable through Etsy’s search feature, she eventually closed it for good, opening her own website instead.

Etsy never released a statement addressing the controversy or Karade directly, but her experience serves as an example for other sellers of color to fall in line or be forced out. Karade’s overtly political departure from the typically celebratory affective engagement with diversity highlights the marginalization of women of color on the platform as well as their association with anger that taints the pursuit of happiness and the good life represented by Etsy, lest they perform a properly docile form of diversity. Karade’s performance of her identity as a black woman and her products enjoined a structural understanding of unhappiness and oppression, as well as the possibility of “solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness, even if we do not inhabit the same place” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 87), but the response from Etsy refused her attempt to associate their happy objects with unhappy realities, and instead positioned her as both an individualized outlier and representation of exactly what Karina feared being associated with herself – “too” black: “To speak out of anger as a woman of color is to confirm your position as the cause of tension; your anger is what threatens the social bond... The woman of color must let go of her anger” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 67-8) and become a docile subject in order to avoid association with bad feeling and be refused from the good life.

The subjects of postfeminism and neoliberalism are normatively white, and with Etsy functioning as an extension of these ideological projects, non-white sellers embody an internal contradiction to the platform as they are both outsiders *and* legitimate sellers

able to make claims to authenticity unavailable to white sellers, but which appeal to buyers seeking goods in a globalized economy. Yet, the framing of both sellers of color and white sellers by Etsy and their ideological positioning shares a preoccupation with the past – for the white, normative subjects, feminism is understood as a movement of the past, with gender parity gains affording contemporary women the opportunity to return to the domestic sphere empowered, and for non-white subjects, the struggles of racism and slavery are likewise situated in the past, allowing for the celebration of color-blind diversity and the obfuscation of continued inequities through the rhetoric of self-entrepreneurialism and personal responsibility, which place hardships squarely on the individual rather than systemic issues. Yet while white women must demonstrate their positive adherence to contemporary ideological expectations, women of color, and particularly black women, must do this work in addition to performing docility and proving their lack of negative association with bad feelings and affects, such as being the ‘angry black woman’. Women of color certainly embody a complex position on the platform with limited availability of claims to the good life, and authenticity – even in justified negative feelings.

Much the way that heterosexuality, femininity and whiteness are pervasive to the platform and thus become invisible norms, class differentiations are erased, collapsing all sellers’ experiences into the same project of neoliberal (self-) entrepreneurialism and a quest for authenticity vis-à-vis home-working and domesticity. While feminism and racism are framed as past struggles, they allow for a reconceptualized return to the home as a site of progress, or New Domesticity, that encourages all women, regardless of race

or sexual orientation, to find self-fulfillment in caring for their families and working from home. The rise of domesticity and “home-working” is driven by multiple factors that are both practical and ideological effects, as well as a nostalgic desire for ‘simpler times,’ in addition to the interpellative power of postfeminism. These motivations include economic necessity; a desire for self-fulfillment, the expression of creativity and passion, to live more sustainably and meaningfully; and an increasingly intensive standards of parenting (Matchar, p. 12, 15). While many people may feel compelled or drawn to domestic pursuits as a supplement to or replacement of employment outside of the home, the capacity to spend one’s time in the home caring for a family or developing creative (entrepreneurial) projects is a distinctly middle-class phenomenon – such an endeavor often requires various forms of capital, and/or the support of a partner, which many Etsy sellers possess and discuss, but do not necessarily attribute to their ability to work in the home. While there are certainly practical reasons for the rise of New Domesticity, they are also tied to neoliberal ideological imperatives that encourage gender re-traditionalization, the extension of working hours, and the normalization of little to no pay for aspirational work that fulfills the individual despite a lack of compensation.

Discussions of domesticity, including family and parenting, as well as difficulties finding a work/life balance and the discipline required to maintain their success, and the loneliness and isolation of working from home are prevalent throughout the features, reflecting contemporary preoccupation with and a return to the domestic sphere for women and the abundant challenges in trying to ‘have it all’ within a postfeminist

framework.¹³ The performative nature of Etsy seller narratives fit this framework that prioritizes “a heightened social and economic emphasis on showplace domesticity, virtuoso parenting, and technologies mobilized in the name of family cohesion” (Negra and Tasker, p. 7), as sellers note their turn toward domesticity and the family alongside their entrepreneurial and creative goals, marking for buyers their adherence to moral discourses and their objects as aligned with the ‘right’ kind of life. These narratives, and their emphasis on domesticity, take on a particular life within Etsy as such specifically digital discourses reflect the paradoxically individualizing nature of neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. These stories are “customized for individual consumption,” making them both “privatized and socialized: Women produce content collectively, for both themselves and their followers... while their consumption of content and the broader reception context is highly individualized” (Wilson and Yochim, p. 235). The positive expression of relationships to domesticity through this digital vein reflect broad social ideologies within a space individualized for the consumption of both the narrative and the attendant literal and figurative happy objects that cohere the affective public.

The performance of domesticity as an ideological imperative and happy object representing alignment with morality is apparent through consistent discourse regarding children and raising a family while being an Etsy seller, reinforcing the ideological expectation that women *should* have children and a family, while simultaneously investing in themselves as entrepreneurs and monetizing their “free time” (Adkins, 2016).

¹³ Family was the third most popular variable in the Featured Shops, with 127 total mentions (3.2 average mentions per post). It was also the third most prevalent in Community posts, with 70 total mentions (3.9 average per post). Mentions could have been of the exact word “family” or a reference to the seller’s children, role as a parent, or relationship with siblings or their own parents.

This shift from working professional to stay-at-home mother who then pursues a creative endeavor becomes a normalized transition for women in Etsy and encourages such a return to “New Domesticity” for other women as well – in addition to consumption of their homemade goods (Matchar, 2013):

Over the years, Megan’s family and her business have grown in tandem. Today, as she awaits the birth of her third child, Among The Flowers has blossomed into a booming business with 13 employees and a beautifully curated storefront for her holistic, thoughtfully designed range of body butters, oils, mists, and plant-based makeup, in her picturesque hometown of Placerville, California. “Among The Flowers started out as a hobby, but it has become like another one of my children, allowing me to be a mother and to express myself as well,” Megan says. “This is path [*sic*] where I feel most fulfilled” (Steel, July 9th, 2018, n.p.)

She also had time and talent on her hands, having left a job as a design assistant in New York City’s Garment District to stay home with the baby. So while Adam napped, she started making hats, using skills she’d honed doing millinery design for the theater while earning her fashion degree (Guglielmetti, May 14th, 2018, n.p.).

Megan’s story marries her family and business roles, stating that they have “grown in tandem” and that she considers her business “like another one of my children,” marking how business is read as an extension of her domestic duties, not a competing factor for her attention or identity. Likewise, the owner of Junior Baby Hatter frames her decision to leave her professional career and join Etsy not as a loss, but as a way to wed her

domestic responsibilities with her existing skillset. These narratives unquestioningly present the primary role of these women as mothers and domestic laborers over against their extensive experience in professional careers; it is only through their investment in themselves and application of postfeminist ideals that they are able to marry familial obligations with goals of self-fulfillment and creativity, implying that financial stability is (and should be) provided by their male partners (Duggan, p. 17). Indeed, fulfillment supplants income, particularly as creativity is collapsed with motherhood, with both achieved in the domestic space, and neither compensated monetarily. With creative labor presented as a ‘choice’ rather than an economic necessity, the postfeminist rhetoric of these passages negates economic disparities and need, positioning consumption and leisure as sites “for the production of the self” (Negra and Tasker, p. 2).

Images included alongside narratives reinforce the ideological connection between intensive parenting and home-based entrepreneurialism, as well as women’s creativity being tied to the domestic sphere. While most features do not include images of families as sellers are typically shown working alone, when families are shown, they highlight the collapse of women’s myriad roles in the home, as well as the supposed support they receive in this endeavor from a heterosexual partner.¹⁴ In each photo, the family is shown in the woman’s home workspace, celebrating home-based entrepreneurialism while also demonstrating that the seller is never completely free of either role; an image of Inbal Carmi shows her attempting to hem a dress while her

¹⁴ Family photos amounted to approximately 6.4% of images from the sample of Featured Shops and Community Posts.

children are occupied with toys, and the owner of Bonnie Kaye Studio is shown playing with her baby atop her desk. At the same time, class distinctions are erased as each image presents an idealized home and workspace; consistently showcasing curated and spacious setups negates the reality that many home-based workers are unable to meet this idyllic expectation due to time or financial constraints. These images – which mark the few instances of familial inclusion – reinforce that entrepreneurialism does not free a woman from her family or domestic labor, but further anchors her to these competing responsibilities, which she must carefully balance in an aesthetically pleasing way.



Figure 11. Random Rompers



Figure 12. Inbal Carmi



Figure 13. Bonnie Kaye Studio

While the rhetoric of these narratives suggests that fulfillment of the self and domestic obligations is indeed possible through Etsy's creative entrepreneurialism, sellers also discuss the difficulties (though not impossible to overcome) of establishing a work/life balance between these competing demands. Such descriptions of attempts to find balance implicitly acknowledge the manifold demands made on women, while assuring readers that they are not impossible to overcome, so long as sellers invest in themselves and their businesses in the right way:

Every day is really a bit different. I had a little girl, Magnolia, in December, so that's been a huge change. At this point, a lot of the work I get done is during her nap time, so it allows me to be a dedicated mom when she's awake and then I hop down into the studio when she's asleep to send emails, update my website, take product photos, and package orders (Schneider, October 22nd, 2018, n.p.)

Kel works in her studio every day. "Working from home allows me to be extremely flexible," she says. "However, I am also a mom of two. This forces me to be very intentional with how I spend my hours." She thinks of (r-ki-tekt) as her 9-to-5 job, though she doesn't keep those specific hours. After the kids are in bed at night, she has an uninterrupted stretch of quiet work time. During the day, Kel squeezes in extra studio time while her young son naps (Schneider, February 28, 2017, n.p.)

Well, it was getting to the point where my business was growing, but my time wasn't getting more plentiful. I have two young daughters, and I was balancing being a mom with my day job and my business. My Etsy shop was getting very busy, especially around the holidays, and I was

starting to burn out. My husband and I decided to give it a try, and it's paid off in spades—I'm just so happy to be committing so much time to my work. I love working with customers, and now I can accept more custom orders, which is something I didn't really have time for before (Mandi Smethells, quoted in A. Brown, June 4, 2018, n.p.)

These days finding time for herself is rare, but Lisette is grateful for her growing business. "I'm proud of what I'm doing and what I've built up," she says. "And now I have this big classroom, with an area for every part of the process. I can finally work efficiently (Duncan, April 4, 2017, n.p.)

At the end of the day, we're tired but happy. And because this is a family business, we're able to solve complex tasks quickly—even when we're on vacation or at home (Black Ficus, quoted in Rains, May 28, 2018, n.p.).

Several of these sellers note the distinct lack of time they have for competing responsibilities, with Kel describing this tension as forcing her to be "intentional with how I spend my hours" and Mandi Smethells noting that "my time wasn't getting more plentiful," yet in each instance the implied lack of sleep and stress is managed with spousal support and self-fulfillment. These sellers discuss how they oscillate between parenting duties and those of their business, and how their schedules become either much more fluid or rigid, depending on their approach to time management. Yet each of these working parents is careful not to prioritize, or portray themselves as prioritizing, their business over their responsibilities to their children, noting the ways that they manage to make their Etsy schedule work around their primary domestic obligations. As with other challenges that Etsy sellers face (when they are discussed at all), they are framed either as

minor inconveniences, problems that have been solved, or reframed in a way that they become a necessarily positive part of the Etsy selling process. Not having enough time for tasks, or working during a vacation is not seen as an inherent flaw in the Etsy system of precarious labor, where sellers must take on an excessive amount of work in order to turn a profit; rather it is an individual problem that can be solved through greater efficiency, flexibility and time management skills as these women are encouraged “to become a creative practitioner questions about making a living fade into the margins and the value of sheer hard work and constant activity take over” (McRobbie, 2016, p. 12). The approach of these sellers to their problems, and how they are conveyed to an audience, reflect the need to consistently perform a positive affective front for potential buyers, while simultaneously internalizing any (systemic) problems as in need of individual solutions. Moreover, the discussion of work/life balance demonstrates how these women negotiate the dual expectations that they participate in the paid workforce and domestic tasks relegated to them in a gendered division of labor, while simultaneously situating their experiences as achievements of the good life, or having it all, increasing the affective reward for sellers and readers (Luckman, 2016). The performance of this work/life balance ostensibly serves as inspirational to other sellers and potential buyers, cohering shared sentiments regarding similar struggles in the affective public that circulates the celebration of this seemingly impossible achievement, further encouraging women to embark on this ideological journey as well as buy the products, or happy objects, that represent its fruition.

The internalization of systemic issues and ideological imperatives, particularly regarding the increasing demands of the gendered division of labor, are further demonstrated through sellers' discussion of the need to be disciplined, a seeming direct gesture to Foucauldian disciplinary tactics and technologies of the self. Many sellers discuss getting caught up in their work and allowing it to bleed into their other myriad responsibilities, as well as feeling generally overwhelmed, yet both of these struggles are framed as in the past as they have managed to adapt (or discipline) themselves:

I'm working a full-time job. It was impossible. I tried for the first month and a half—I was responding to emails all night, and then I'd sleep for an hour and wake up and go to work. Everyone wanted catalogs and line sheets and I was like, *I have paper plates. On my bed.* But it all worked out (Bash Party Goods, quoted in A. Brown, May 7, 2018, n.p.)

It's very comfortable to work from home, but it's challenging, too. You never really leave. Having free time requires discipline (Oldwool, quoted in A. Brown, December 31, 2018, n.p.)

I have to be super intentional with how I spend my time now and it takes a lot of planning, but it's doable—and I feel really grateful that I'm able to continue working while also being there for my daughter (Everli Jewelry, quoted in Guglielmetti, October 8, 2018, n.p.)

When I get into a groove with the glass, I could just go on and on. But then when I come out of the studio, it's like, "Did I just spend 42 hours in there over the last three days?" I don't notice time when I'm creating. I have to set the timer on my phone so that I know when I need to go do

something or even just go to bed (Fleeting Stillness, quoted in A. Brown, September 10, 2018, n.p.).

These sellers alternatively discuss feeling overwhelmed, needing discipline, overextending themselves, and realizing that they need to create boundaries for themselves. While in each of these instances the sellers noted that more was required or expected of them than they could manage, they all framed these difficulties as issues *within themselves*, that required more investment in themselves, more discipline, and more development of techniques to foster their productivity. Despite the prevalence of these issues across features (as well as the independent and informal workforce), such struggles are individualized, much as the affective engagement they engender from buyers who are encouraged to engage with them as individual shops with particularly unique items. At the same time, these sellers framed their experiences as ultimately positive; not only is it possible to overcome the expectations of endless work with the right combination of self-governance and work ethic, but that the increased efficiency allows them to enjoy the work more. In all of these instances, sellers present an affectively engaging and aggressively positive face to their shop and their experience, despite consistently noting the many difficulties that they face, which, while individualized, reflect a system that requires the deployment of an individual's full capacity at all times.

A paradoxical result of the individualization of home-based entrepreneurialism and the connectivity of the affective public created by Etsy as a forum is the extent to which sellers note their loneliness, harkening to the concerns of discontented middle class

housewives of second wave feminism and the increasing contemporary pressures on women to return to the home. Despite the prevalence of loneliness, sellers frame their experiences positively, relying on social media networks, service workers, and their customers to maintain affective connections:

It can be a lonely job being a stay-at-home mom, but through Etsy, I've connected with so many lovely customers who live all over the world. Parents often tag me in photos of their children on Instagram, and that's been one of the biggest joys in this process (écolier kids, quoted in Steel, August 6, 2018, n.p.)

There's another side of working alone: I really love the post office. The post office people think I'm mad because I run in there every afternoon, and I'm like, "Good day, coworkers! I haven't spoken to anyone all day. How are you guys?" I consequently get invited to their Christmas parties. I give them presents at Easter and Christmas and stuff because they do so much for me (Each To Own, quoted in Schneider, March 7, 2018, n.p.)

It can get really lonely if you don't have some kind of social outlet. The studio addressed my need for community and being around people more, because I had been working in a basement all alone day after day (Beardbangs, quoted in Schneider, March 28, 2017, n.p.).

Each of these women noted the difficulties in being relegated to the domestic sphere, and their longing for human interaction. As for many Etsy sellers and other stay-at-home parents, the owner of ecolier kids noted the significance of social media in connecting her to others, while the owner of Each To Own presents the grim reality of isolation and the

sometimes desperate need for human contact. Loneliness is an inherent aspect of home-based entrepreneurialism and digital labor, but this (like other struggles mentioned above) is internalized and addressed through individualized responses such as fostering social media or postal relationships. Each of these sellers also noted how customer relationships provided them a significant outlet as well, pointing to how their interaction with customers may be as much about fulfilling their own social needs as providing a personalized service.

Images of sellers reinforce the sense of their isolation and the need to actively engage an affective public and create a community, as sellers are consistently shown alone in their workspaces, when not with their children.¹⁵ Such solitary images of sellers typically show them either smiling at the camera, or looking away and/or working, showing their diligence in their labor, as well as attempts to establish an embodied and affective relationship with the reader, who can get a sense of their working life, as well as the reward that sellers receive from intermittent engagement with customers. Images of sellers working extensive hours alone also draw attention to the notion that, “If postfeminist popular culture celebrates female agency and women’s powers of consumption, it also anxiously raises the possible consequences of female independence, crudely: emotional isolation for women (a preoccupation that neatly sidesteps questions of women’s economic instability)” (Negra and Tasker, p. 4). Within the postfeminist neoliberal logic that Etsy operates through, acknowledging women’s isolation (a

¹⁵ Approximately 30% of images from the sample show the owner alone, with only an additional 4% of images showing them with family or pets. Of the 249 photos of the shop owner, 91 (37.4%) show them looking at the camera, 145 (59.7%) show them looking away from the camera, and another 140 (57.6%) show them working.

historical issue associated with domestic labor) is a welcome distraction from the unstable aspects of self-entrepreneurialism, and overall employment shifts. These images likewise emphasize the individualization and authenticity of these sellers as neoliberal micro-entrepreneurs, further entrenching the affective public's imbrication with ideological imperatives and affective rewards for sellers' dedication to their craft and attempts to align themselves with the good life.



Figure 14. *Fleeting Stillness*



Figure 15. Studio KMO



Figure 16. Almanac for June

Etsy sellers' relationship to domesticity appears fraught, with celebrations of motherhood and home-working juxtaposed with loneliness and difficulties finding work/life balance, highlighting how the affective public is defined by sellers' supposed authenticity in the face of consistent tensions. Narratives and images work together to highlight the issues women face in achieving self-fulfillment and performing their role as postfeminist figures who successfully balance familial and entrepreneurial duties, while ultimately portraying struggles with their roles as *in the past*. Sellers and Etsy writers work to assure consumers that by engaging a transactional relationship, they are affirming these women's attainment of the good life (understood as being authentic and fulfilled creatively and domestically) as well as their own participation in the affective public.

While the appeal of this affective matrix may be less apparent for the casual shopper, it is certainly undeniable for the avid shopper, committed seller, or relentless researcher. I noticed that as I read these blog posts for hours, and then days on end, I slowly found myself thinking about ways to spruce up my own desk area and workspace. As I scrolled through the highly edited and overexposed images of these sellers' studios, products and selves, I would consider whether putting up new wall art or reorganizing my own threads to be more aesthetically pleasing would inspire me to craft or write more. I certainly began cross stitching more, considering how I could find time to create new designs to sell on Etsy, and found myself daydreaming about crafting while reading and coding blog posts. What is most surprising about this is that I had not made a single sale

on Etsy myself in months, including through the typically hectic and profitable holiday season. Despite the endless research showing overall declines in sales and my own recently lackluster selling experience, I was intoxicated by the affective charge of the optimistic mantras and luminous photos of the Featured Shop and Community blogs, which assured me that work/life balance and personal fulfillment were within my reach! And I began to believe it, despite my best efforts at a jaded academic distance. It was in that moment, when after spending a day bent over my laptop internally complaining about my back pain and how nice it was outside while I was stuck indoors, as I was curled around the glow of my monitor reviewing my own shop statistics and designing a new pattern for sale, that I realized I had been deeply affected by the intricate and delicate combination of affective cues and relentless optimism that Etsy and its sellers had expertly crafted. While anecdotal, my experience points toward the coherence of the affective public established through Etsy that promises an authentic life through self-fulfillment as achieved in a creative journey toward domestic bliss.

3. Kiva: Selling Economic Empowerment

Kiva, as a transnational microlending non-profit that brings Western lenders to typically non-Western borrowers, perpetuates structures of inequality through its adherence to neoliberal ideologies that presume individual responsibility for systemic causes of income inequality as well as its touting of capitalism and the free market as solutions to these divides, rather than their cause. The spaces of Kiva (primarily borrower and lender profiles) situate users within a hierarchical dynamic that affirms Western lenders as successful neoliberal citizens who are in a self-affirming position to ‘give back,’ with non-U.S. borrowers positioned as exoticized Others who are in need of the paternalistic intervention of Westerners, and their funds. Despite attempts at creating the appearance of engagement, the platform functions largely unidirectionally, with lenders using the site to visit borrower profiles that have been created by Kiva editors, meaning that while Kiva borrowers receive loans, they do not control their representation on the site, or the complicated way that their identity as a borrower is produced for the benefit of lenders. In other words, the platform is designed for lenders, who create their own profiles, direct message each other and participate in Lending Teams, using Kiva as a social networking site that privileges doing good and the reward of feeling good, without having any messy direct engagements with those they are helping. The affective public of

Kiva, then, is less focused on engaging disparate populations across the globe than it is in affirming lenders' structurally dominant positionality through an atmosphere of philanthropy and feeling good about doing good. Yet borrowers are not simply positioned as indigent and grateful, though that is present too; as the site is designed to affirm lenders' successful embodiment of neoliberal citizenship, borrower profiles perform markers of neoliberal citizenship, and thus their authenticity, as well by making claims to being hardworking, family oriented and self-sufficient. Borrower profiles use both narrative and visual cues to convey these sentiments affectively, affirming the identity of lenders in an affective structure that positions them against the Other and allows them to praise each other for their generosity as well as successful adherence to free market capitalism and ideological constructs of the nuclear family, individualism and personal responsibility.

The markers of authenticity in Kiva are distinctly performative happy objects tied to moral discourses that privilege those quality that align with neoliberal ideologies and the imagined values of Western lenders, framing this neoliberal form of charity as a project of neocolonialism, or the use of capitalism and cultural imperialism to indirectly rule subjugated populations. The happiness project of Kiva uses the performative construction of borrower profiles to affirm the Western values of lenders, which are similarly espoused in lender profiles, drawing lenders closer to neoliberal ideals and the good life through affective appeals. Borrower profiles highlight their need, personal responsibility, and provision for the nuclear family, which, along with their entrepreneurialism, demonstrate their imagined authenticity as neoliberal citizens, while

simultaneously affirming these qualities in lenders, alongside lenders' espousal of the free market as a site for opportunity and poverty alleviation. This construction of borrowers functions as a form of neocolonialism as it obfuscates the structural inequalities endemic to global poverty, and instead enforces a performative adherence to the very cultural and economic practices that position borrowers as indigent and in need of Western pity and paternalistic intervention. While borrowers receive their microloans, which are typically ineffective at extracting them from the cycle of poverty, while lenders are given "a highly visible and 'feel-good' platform upon which they can publicly claim to be addressing the issue of poverty and inequality, but which in fact delivers up no real possibility of this ever happening" (Bateman, p. 162). Instead, lenders enjoy affective rewards for their philanthropy and saviorhood while perpetuating neocolonial domination, which "for those who practice it... means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress" (Nkrumah, p. xi), or a reliance on docility. The affective public of Kiva, then, is defined by the circulation of sentiments that affirm lenders' dominant positionality and adherence to neoliberal ideologies that has led them to financial success or stability, while imagining that this same 'success' is possible for borrowers who appropriately perform Western values.

This chapter will analyze the constitutive elements of Kiva's affective matrix that affirm lenders' identities and encourage them to lend to both U.S. and non-U.S. borrowers. I will begin by outlining how Kiva logistically operates, including a discussion of loan disbursement and what encompasses each profile – the primary focus of analysis as sites of mediation and representation, as a foundation that argue that Kiva

functions as an affective public that converges around happy objects and their ideological association with the good life, or successful neoliberal citizenship. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to analyzing how the specific markers of authenticity are performed in both narratives and images, constituting forms of affective labor on the part of lenders and Kiva editors, which encourage a sense of (unilateral) intimacy and transactions. Significantly, borrower profiles are devoid of religious, political and ethnic markers or context, limiting their representation as ‘authentic’ to generalized understandings of neediness, and performance of happy objects, or the embodiment of personality responsibility for one’s financial future and family. I then move to specifically discussing the self-representation of U.S.-based borrowers, who, differentially, create their own profiles and frame themselves less as exoticized Others (as is the case of non-U.S. borrowers) and more as self-actualizing activists and capitalists, aligning them more with the sellers of Etsy as aspirationally middle-class entrepreneurs than the racialized non-Western borrowers of Kiva. Finally, I argue that lenders’ self-representation in profiles focus on their capacity to empower others through loans or charity and receive affective rewards in the process as a way to affirm the(ir own) capacity to overcome struggle through the remunerative benefits of the free market and demonstrate successful neoliberal citizenship.

Kiva is part of a milieu of microcredit and microfinance organizations that have launched since the embrace of Muhammad Yunus’s (the founder of the original microfinance organization the Grameen Bank) ideas by the development community in the 1990s and 2000s (Schiller, 2015). Microcredit has largely been hailed as an answer to

widespread poverty, particularly in the Global South, and a means for not only providing access to credit and financial literacy tools to the most marginalized groups (mainly women), but empowering them as well. Yet, paradoxically, while microcredit has been enabled by the current wave of globalization, it is this set of processes, combined with the ideological imperatives of neoliberalism, that have accelerated such drastic global economic inequalities to begin with. To that end, Kiva's mission and borrowers are framed within a neoliberal model of charity that infantilizes borrowers through their demonstration of personal responsibility and individualism in order to satisfy Western lenders. Microfinance is largely utilized by individuals working in the informal sector and perpetuates their income instability, rather than creating sustainable jobs or skillsets (Bateman, p. 91), thus ensuring their continued dependency on Western aid. To that end, it certainly does not empower individuals experiencing poverty, as they remain in poverty (seen in part through continuous loan application through Kiva), largely do not gain access to formal education (Schiller, 2015), and are encouraged to accept their meager conditions rather than create political economic upheaval. While there are certainly macro level factors that ensure the domination of the Global South, their subjection is ensured at the micro, or individual level, through the spread and internalization of neoliberal ideologies accomplished in part through development practices such as microfinance. Microcredit, specifically as structured through Kiva's crowdsourcing template, remains a successful enterprise in the limited capacity that borrowers largely receive the loans they ask for (through infantilization), and, perhaps more significantly, lenders receive the self-satisfaction they require from the process (through saviorhood).

The Kiva website greets visitors with the tagline “Dreams are universal, opportunity is not. Lend as little as \$25 to create opportunity for people around the world”. This tagline overlays a slideshow of smiling brown faces in shops, on farms or boats, or with family. Immediately below this racialized welcome that creates a juxtaposition between the Western lenders and overtly non-Western borrowers, is a button with the phrase “Start lending,” emphasizing that the site is geared toward lenders rather than borrowers. Through the site, individuals and groups (predominantly from Western nations) make microloans to individuals and businesses in 85 different countries (including the U.S.), with most of its focus in Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Kiva’s stated mission “to connect people through lending to alleviate poverty” begins with a minimum loan amount of \$25 from one of the approximately 1.7 million lenders to one of the approximately 2.9 million borrowers (up to 5,000 loan requests are open at a given time), or businesses, 81% of whom are women (“About us,” n.d.). To date, over \$1.16 billion in loans have been funded, with a 96.9% repayment rate (“About us,” n.d.). Kiva stands out from other sites of its kind through its focus on connectivity – ostensibly between lenders and borrowers, lenders and lenders, and lenders and borrowing countries, and its emphasis on making microloans accessible to lenders the way Grameen Bank made them accessible to borrowers (Gajjala, et al, p. 884). Kiva also stands out from other crowdsourcing sites such as GoFundMe or Kickstarter as the givers are lenders rather than donors; lenders can give as much to as many borrowers as they choose, but do not receive any interest on their loans (which goes

to Kiva's Field Partners who disburse funds in each country), nor any guarantee that the loans will be repaid.

The loans, which can be funded by anyone who creates a profile, are facilitated either directly (U.S. only) or through Field Partners (local organizations who vet borrowers and provide other financial literacy services). Lenders and borrowers are inherently situated unevenly as one is asking the other for money, a disparity perpetuated by lenders' sole qualifications being the willingness to offer a minimum loan of \$25 and the desire to help "create opportunity". This unevenness reflects a neocolonial framing that positions users hierarchically with lenders ostensibly able to empower borrowers through their access to discretionary income and ability to thus determine who is 'deserving' of support, despite a lack of clarity in the loan process or any information about borrowers' business plans. While the site outlines the steps taken by U.S. borrowers for direct loans, the process for obtaining a partner loan by non-U.S. borrowers is less clear, presumably as each Field Partner would have their own individual approval systems.¹⁶ Kiva states that in order to allow more immediate access to needed funds, most non-U.S. borrowers receive their money *before* the loan request is posted (pre-disbursal) to the Kiva website at all. Once posted to Kiva, loans have 30 days to successfully be filled, and if the loan request is met, the money is used to backfill the loan amount. But, if the full request is not met, then the pledged funds are returned to lenders, but the borrower *is not directly affected*, as they have already been guaranteed funding by the

¹⁶ The processes by which each of Kiva's Field Partners determines eligibility for loans are not elaborated on the Kiva website.

Field Partner, which uses interest reserves for pre-disbursal (“How Kiva works,” n.d.). In other words, despite lenders making their selections based on a particular borrower’s story and demonstration of need, their money goes to that borrower’s Field Partner – not the individual themselves. The only impact this system has on a borrower directly if their loan is not filled by the 30 day deadline, is that they are less likely to be approved by Kiva and the Field Partner to appear on the site in the future as they have proven an affectively unappealing candidate to lenders, reinforcing the need to adhere to strict affective and ideological norms in the presentation of borrower profiles.

The obfuscated process of backfilling loans caused public outcry when it was revealed in 2009 by an investigation conducted by a research fellow with the Center for Global Development (Roodman 2009; Strom 2009), marking the significance of lenders’ belief that they are helping a specific individual who sufficiently demonstrates adherence to neoliberal ideals. Lenders were dismayed at the “illusion of person-to-person contact” (Strom, n.p.) and that their “pursuit of pleasure” (Roodman, n.p.) in giving was hampered by layers of mediation that prevented them from claiming they had helped a specific borrower with a particular endeavor. The site eventually adjusted its wording of lenders’ role away from this direct connection, but the process of loan fulfillment remains the same and the number of lenders and loans has only continued to grow, demonstrating that a connection with the individual borrower is not so important as the *feeling* lenders receive from their philanthropy. Yet lenders do still make direct loans to U.S. borrowers, which, in addition to a general increased media literacy and differential relationship to neoliberal ideologies, may (in part) explain the differential emphasis in these profiles.

The distinction between these two loans – direct and partner – reflect the broader differences in representation for these borrowers across the site (which will be further explored in a following section). Generally, U.S. borrowers are able to craft their own profiles and receive funds directly from Kiva, while non-U.S. borrowers are vetted by a third-party Field Partner, and then funds may be disbursed to a borrower before, during or after the loan request is “gently” edited by Kiva volunteers and posted to the website.

Borrower profiles are the only space on the site for lenders to get a sense of who they are lending money to and to what end. While they necessarily share a basic format to ensure consistency – borrower photo, overview of the loan, the borrower’s “story,” and the sections “This loan is special because” and “More about this loan” – they also share the styles of photos, language, and narrative structure. Borrowers do not, in fact, write their own ‘stories,’ as many of them are nearly identical, only changing out personal identifiers. More specifically, structural similarities across borrower profiles are seemingly differentiated primarily by Field Partner; all borrowers working with the same Field Partner have extremely similar profiles. The glaring consistency of these posts exposes how these textual and visual cues are used to modulate the affective responses of lenders toward specific ends – namely creating the paradoxical perception of a connection despite the overall lack of distinction, as well as reinforcement of neoliberal ideologies, in order to secure more frequent and larger loans. visitors to the site have the option of perusing loans by category (such as “Agriculture,” “Arts,” and “Eco-Friendly”) with “Women” being the first option in the dropdown menu, presumably as women comprise the majority of microcredit recipients worldwide at approximately 80%

(“Microfinance Barometer 2019,” 2018).¹⁷ As an example, clicking on the “Women” link leads a visitor to the page of filtered loans and a tagline that reads:

Women around the world have much less access to fair and affordable credit for their businesses or basic needs. While 46% of men around the world report having access to formal financial services, the figure is only 27% for women. Support women starting businesses, going to school, leading their communities and building strong families (“Women,” n.d.).

This introduction immediately alerts the reader to the widespread inequality experienced by women in financial services, provides an alarming statistic to affirm the assertion, and then asks the reader to help alleviate this disparity by making loans to women, allowing an assertion of benign patriarchy by providing for women in need. This framing depends on an affective appeal – immediate pity or outrage at this inequality – in order to draw lenders in, and then suggests that the answer to this dilemma can be provided by individuals and individual loans, rather than structural, global changes. Indeed, the neoliberal logic of this welcome draws on the widespread inequality experienced by women globally for affective appeal, while negating a collective response and instead fostering a patriarchal engagement. The next image the visitor sees on the loan category page, in this case “Women,” is a preview of each woman’s profile. Profile previews include the name of the woman, the country she is from, a partial sentence that conveys the total loan amount requested and what the loan will help pay for (“A loan of \$725

¹⁷ The sample included 87 borrower profiles from the categories “Women,” “Single parents,” and “Arts”.

helps to purchase a water filtration system...”), and how much they need to meet their goal. Each of these profile previews includes a button labeled “Lend \$25” as loans are funded in increments of a \$25 minimum. Likewise, the preview highlights how much money is needed for the loan to be filled, creating a sense of urgency in the affective appeal, particularly for those loans categorized under “Expiring Soon”. By moving from a statement about the shared experience of inequality to the individual asks of each borrower, the visitor is situated as able to feel for the women, as well as imagine that this issue can be remedied through providing microloans, which can be easily accomplished by clicking on the prominent “Lend” button.

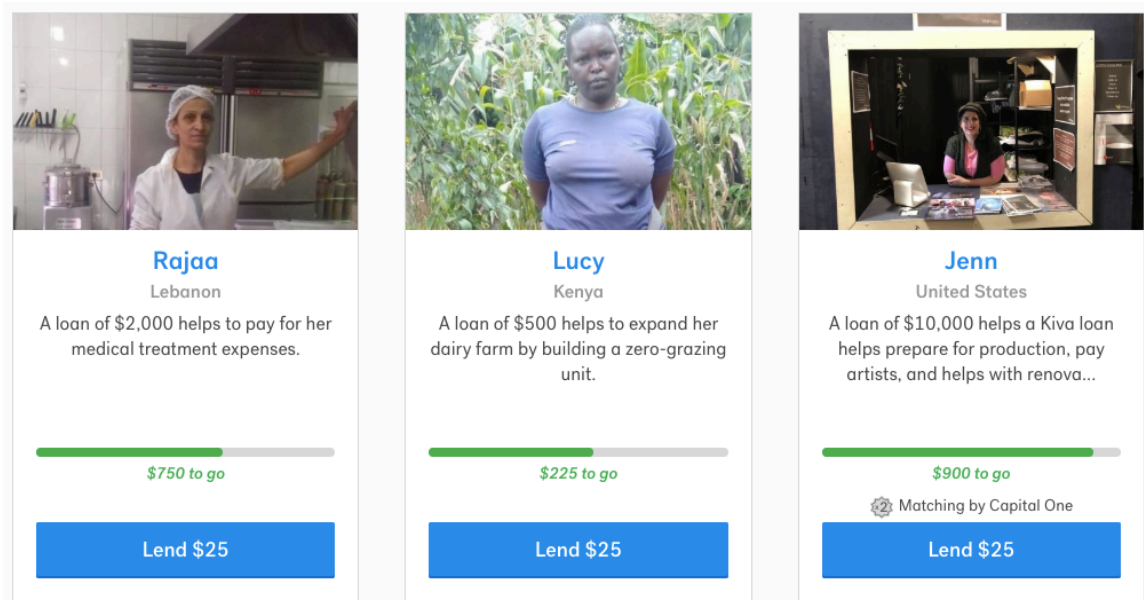


Figure 17. Profile Previews, “Women”

Once a visitor to the site clicks on an individual borrower's preview, they are taken to their full profile page, which provides a larger image of the borrower, their story, and their loan details. The borrower image and statistics of the loan (how much they are asking for, how much still needs to be funded, and how many lenders are funding it) are prioritized at the top of the page, followed by the borrower's "story", which details their demographic information and personal background. Overwhelmingly, borrowers' stories begin with noting the borrower's age and marital status, how many children they have, and whether the children are grown, live with the borrower, or if the borrower lives on their own or with family ("Said is 64 years old and married with 4 children"; "Fale is 41 years old and single with 8 children"). It is presumed that the most significant thing to know about each borrower are these personal elements of their identity, *not* how their business operates, how long they've been in business, or what their business needs are. A description of their business and the loan itself is deprioritized, being placed in a lower sidebar, and only sometimes further explained in the optional "More about this loan" section. The visual structuring of the profile – which emphasizes an image of the borrower and their individual story – demonstrates that these affectively charged elements are of more importance when considering whether to lend funds than the actual loan description itself. In other words, lenders are encouraged to lend to a person who pulls at their heartstrings, or who makes them feel important, rather than a business, with the potential success of that business or utility of the loan a mere side note.

The affective appeal and disparity between users rely on borrower images in addition to textual elements to relay affective cues and encourage lending. Unlike the

professional quality and meticulously edited photos of Etsy sellers seen in the last chapter, non-U.S. Kiva borrower photos appear to be taken using cheap digital cameras and are often blurry, have poor lighting, and feature the borrower in her workspace or in front of a wall – unsmiling and wearing the (presumably) traditional clothing of her given culture. Photos position non-U.S. borrowers as the Other to the subjecthood of lenders through visual cues of vulnerability and poverty that engender affective responses of sympathy and pity. Conversely, U.S. borrowers, who are less subject to Othering due to their geographic and cultural proximity to lenders, demonstrate their self-sufficiency, passion and professionalism, eliciting empathy and excitement from potential lenders. The visual performance of U.S. and non-U.S. borrowers rely on different (self) representations to establish affective connections and garner loans, dependent on their differential ideological positioning relative to Western lenders. Kiva presumably *could* dedicate more funds to ensuring higher quality photos of non-U.S. borrowers for the site, the substandard quality of images only affirms what the lender reads in the text: these borrowers are in need *because* they are different from Western entrepreneurs and it is this difference which makes them appealing. In other words, the poverty of the image highlights the poverty of means embodied by these borrowers. The specific operation of these borrower images will be elucidated alongside analysis of ideological markers of authenticity in a later section, but draw attention to them here as they necessarily work in tandem with the text – both of previews and full profiles – to appeal to visitors to the site and modulate affective responses.



61% funded

19 days left

\$775 to go

Total loan: \$2,000

Powered by 39 lenders

Rajaa



Aley, Lebanon / Personal Medical Expenses

\$25 ▼

Lend now

A loan of \$2,000 helps to pay for her medical treatment expenses.

Rajaa's story

Rajaa, a 54-year-old Lebanese mother of two children, is a talented handicraft maker, who is running her home-based business in this domain in addition to her job in the kitchen of an orphanage. She strives to support her children with enough income for a decent living and to cover her own expenses.

Rajaa is also an outstanding borrower from Kiva's field partner Al Majmoua, and she always benefits from its products to cover all her family's education and medical expenses. She is once again acquiring a loan for the eleventh cycle to pay for her medical treatment expenses that she cannot currently afford. This hardworking mother wishes to develop her business, to be financially independent and to cover all her family's needs and offer them a decent life.

[Show currently repaying previous loan details](#)

Loan details



Loan length:

14 months

Repayment schedule: Monthly

Disbursed date: March 11, 2019

Currency exchange loss: N/A

Facilitated by Field Partner: Al Majmoua

Is borrower paying interest? Yes

Field Partner risk rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

Field Partner: Al Majmoua

Repayment schedule

Figure 18. Rajaa, "Women"

The profiles of Kiva lenders have both a different function and appearance from those of borrowers; their profiles read more like other social media and encourage relationship-building and crowdsourcing rather than appeals to pity or sympathy.¹⁸ However, the lender profiles are certainly deemphasized on the site, and cannot be accessed individually, except through the “Lending Teams” or the list of current lenders on a borrower’s profile. Lenders are granted the option of invisibility and anonymity (they are not required to include an image or name) further marking a differential in power and capacity to self-represent, or create their own narrative, beyond just their financial presence. The lender profiles are significantly less robust than borrower profiles, having only a thumbnail photo, and the option to respond to the prompts “About Me,” “Occupation,” “Location,” and “I loan because”. While lenders are not required to complete any of these sections or include a photo in order to establish a profile, the inclusion of only these categories by Kiva evinces what is important to Kiva, and consequently what should be of importance to lenders (at least in regard to the site). The limited images of lenders have comparatively nominal impact on the site, as they are only visible to other lenders, are not required, and are significantly smaller and deemphasized in the hierarchy of visibility.¹⁹ Lender profiles are also distinguished by the users’ complete control over their self-representation and, more generally, their interactions

¹⁸ The sample of Kiva lender narratives included 72 lenders with profiles across the top five lending teams, including Kiva Christians; (A+) Atheists, Agnostics, Freethinkers, Secular Humanists and the Non-Religious; The Mindful Bunch; InsideFlyer; and Nerdfighters. Of these teams, the average lender was a white male from the United States, participating in over 5 teams and over 1,200 microloans.

¹⁹ The sample of Kiva lender images included 85 images. The total number of lender profiles in the sample was 127, though each profile did not necessarily include any responses to prompts or any image. These photos were mostly likely to be a close-up (56.5%), of the lender smiling (50.6%), and/or looking at the camera (64.7%).

with the site; lenders can include as much or as little information in their profile as they choose, and can also direct message each other, become members of teams, and, of course, make loans. The presentation of these images, paired with the narrative responses to prompts, appears akin to a typical social media profile. In this way, Kiva, for lenders, is structured as a cause-based social media platform where they can engage with and build multi-dimensional connections with each other, as opposed to the unidirectional engagement they have with borrowers. This framing suggests that Kiva is a fun place for Western lenders to congregate and have an affectively rewarding point of connection, as opposed to emphasizing their role as investors who control the financial future of others. While the site may be framed as a social networking platform for lenders, “the networking fostered does not place all users on equal footing... This lack of social equality comes from the economic inequality of the borrowers and lenders” (Gajjala, et al., p. 886). The option to include an image – of themselves or something they feel represents them – reifies the control Kiva lenders have of their own self-representation and their situatedness in a position of relative power over borrowers on the site. Lenders are granted significant discretion in determining how they will be understood, a differentiation that reflects the neocolonial dynamic of the site and microlending projects; borrowers are positioned to reflect those qualities valued by their financial benefactors and must fall in line in order to be rewarded with a loan. While borrower profiles draw an affective engagement from lenders by being presented as the ‘right’ kind of borrower, lenders only engage *with other lenders* other vis-à-vis their profiles, and thus work to appear – to each other – as the ‘right’ kind of lender. An in-depth discussion of how

lender profiles perform neoliberal ideologies and citizenship will be explored in a following section, but it is worth noting here how their construction reflects a different performative valence and affective capacity than borrower profiles.

Kiva Lender Jordan



Location: Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Occupation: Media Department for a spiritual science org.

I loan because: I want to help as many people as possible. I LOVE my life right now, I am so grateful to be living overseas in India. I am so happy, so I think this is an important way to give back. If I'm happy, then I have to give back to show gratitude.

About me: I am in the media department, I create and edit audios, videos, webcasts, for a spiritual teacher I follow, who's based here in Chennai. He mixes spirituality and science, with Vedic Astrology and I love working here at Astroved Inc.

Figure 19. Jordan, Lender Profile

Kiva Lender Heather



Location: Taree, NSW, Australia

Occupation: retired primary school music teacher

I loan because: Those of us born by chance into comfortable living situations need to share our luck. It's also very satisfying to lend, get repaid, then lend again.

About me: I really enjoy getting people (adults and children) playing music together - especially on home-made marimbas.

Figure 20. Heather, Lender Profile

Kiva Lender Diane (& Bill)



Location:	Ottawa, ON, Canada
I loan because:	Microfinance is a great tool for community development. We empower by investing in people.
About me:	Kiva allows us to become personally involved in a small but significant manner. We like the simple way that we can encourage very hard working people.
Member Since:	Jan 9, 2014

Figure 21. Diane (& Bill), Lender Profile

The compounded affective appeal of both narratives and images in borrower profiles, paired with the echoing of neoliberal ideals in lender profiles, foster an affective public that orients lenders toward the good life through investment in ideological fantasies, or happy objects, such as the capacity to empower others through capitalism and the free market and taking personal responsibility for one's socioeconomic position through hard work. Happy objects, understood here as values, practices and aspirations (Ahmed, 2010), include the ideological performance of authenticity through demonstration of need, or capacity to empower others, and willingness to engage hard work or ability to lend due to 'success' in the capitalist system. The circulation of these happy objects in borrower and lender profiles facilitates the perception of a connection between lenders and borrowers, but as borrowers have little to no access to the site, this connection is unidirectional, with profiles engendering an affective response from lenders and encouraging them to lend. Instead of a connection that brings together disparate populations, lenders are affirmed in their adherence to neoliberal values while providing

themselves the affective pleasure of philanthropy, with a limited capacity to build relationships between each other, and which are often competitive in nature as “Lending Teams” are ranked by total number of loans and loan dollars contributed.²⁰ To that end, the responses to the few prompts within lender profiles further elucidate lenders’ internalization of neoliberal ideologies such as personal responsibility and individualism, as well as the remunerative capacities of the free market, which, through strict adherence, bring them closer in line with the fantasy of the good life.

The stories within borrower profiles likewise affirm lenders’ positionality and orientation to the good life by performing adherence to ideological constructs, but importantly without any discussion of identity markers – religion, politics, ethnicity or cultural norms – that may make them appear a less desirable candidate for lenders. In each profile, the borrower is allowed only the barest markers of identity to define them as Other, as inherently distinct and in need of help from Western lenders, but without the specificity that may complicate their appeal. Borrower stories are crafted to attract the widest possible lending base, necessitating a balance between a generic appeal to Western values by an exoticized Other, not a problematic or controversial Other. This need for a performance that does not alienate potential lenders is affirmed by the two most popular “Lending Teams” being Christians and then Atheists; borrower stories need to appeal to a wide spectrum of religious and other communities, marking a complex challenge to present themselves as both different from and sympathetic for lenders.

²⁰ As of June 2019, there were over 37,000 Lending Teams operating through Kiva.

The lack of cultural context for borrowers' life position has two primary ideological functions: it ensures that lenders are discouraged from learning about the complex matrices of oppression that situate borrowers as in need and bring them to a site like Kiva, leading borrowers' struggles to be individualized rather than seen systemically; and, consequently, it affirms the neoliberal ideology of colorblind diversity or tolerance for difference, which becomes a coded tool for decreasing governmental spending and correcting inequalities. Only enough information is provided about each borrower to spark an affective connection based on the circulation of happy objects as moral values and pique the lender's interest without encouraging systemic change. As an example, the profile of Shahnoza, a woman from Tajikistan seeking a loan to pay for higher education costs, demonstrates these ideological effects as her story reflects the individualization of neoliberalism, obfuscating the typical nature of her struggles, and framing her as attempting to take personal responsibility for her life circumstances. Shahnoza's story states that she "is a very beautiful lady from Firdavsi, Tajikistan. She is 30 years old, divorced and raising her young child alone. She loves her child and tries to provide her family with the best conditions in life. She has worked in a company for 7 years... [and] also is a part-time student at the university" (Shahnoza, Tajikistan, "Women"). Without cultural context, this could sound like the story of any woman, any single parent across the globe, which positions her as pursuing the good life in attempting to provide for her family and her story as relatable though depersonalized – fitting with the ideal of colorblind diversity. However, a closer look at the circumstances within Tajikistan reveals a more complex picture for female single parents like Shahnoza. Tajikistan is one

of the world's 30 poorest countries ("Tajikistan"), with women being disproportionately affected by poverty, as well as discrimination and inequality, and low representation in Tajik politics ("Tajikistan"). Along with one third to one half of women experiencing violence perpetuated by husbands or other family members ("Tajikistan Human Rights"), there is a high number of women being financially abandoned by their (ex) husbands who emigrate for work ("Tajikistan"), which has led to talks of allowing prenuptial agreements to protect women and their children (Najibullah and Muhammad, 2017). While it is not clear whether Shahnoza fits this profile, many other women like her within Tajikistan do face domestic violence, abandonment and systemic poverty. Borrowers' markers of authenticity, such as Shahnoza's love of her children and attempts to provide for her family, are made palatable and lack dimension in order that they may appeal to the widest possible lending base, while also demonstrating that the suppression of contextual information affirms that the process of microlending, in this capacity, is dependent upon an immediate affective response to ideological appeals rather than a coherent understanding of individual borrowers' position within a political economic framework.

Shahnoza's story

Shahnoza is a very beautiful lady from Firdavsi, Tajikistan. She is 30 years old, divorced and raising her young child alone. She loves her child and tries to provide her family with the best conditions in life. She has worked in a company for 7 years and is respected by her colleagues.

She also is a part-time student at the university. She is an excellent student and is in her last year of study. She needs money to pay for her tuition.

She is asking for a loan from Kiva's partner IMON to pay for her tuition at the university in order to complete her study and become a good economist in the future. She depends on you and thanks you in advance for the understanding.

Figure 22. Shahnoza's Story

As I have previously noted, authenticity is not a self-evident identity, but rather its markers are produced as modes of performative self-representation that align both with dominant neoliberal ideologies and Kiva's corporate narrative. Lender and borrower profiles perform, alternatively, the roles of a benevolent benefactor and an indigent Other in need of minimal financial support, while both participating in the circulation of happy objects and perpetuating the fulfillment of loans through a neocolonial division of hierarchy. Despite their individualized presentation, borrower profiles are decidedly formulaic while lender profiles are limited and used to present a particular version of the self. Taken together, these profiles reify ideological expectations that neoliberal citizens take responsibility for their socioeconomic position and present their experiences as

distinctly individual – not as part of larger structures of inequality or domination. Yet, both borrower and lender profiles affirm ideological constructs and their coinciding sentiments in an affective public that orients lenders toward authenticity and the good life, as evinced through their dominant positionality, or, capacity to give and fulfillment from ‘giving back’.

Unlike the distinctly neocolonial and hierarchical division created between non-U.S. borrowers and Western lenders, U.S.-based borrowers straddle the performative structure of Kiva and Etsy as they are allowed latitude to craft their own narrative and provide more context to their circumstances, as well as include their own edited photos. Differences from the narratives of non-U.S. borrowers are reflected in the contrasting ideological imperatives that emerge from U.S. borrowers’ stories, including an emphasis on customer relationships and their passion or journey to this point of entrepreneurship, in addition to more freely discussion their political views, race and ethnicity.²¹ These disparities reflect not only how U.S. borrowers are able to craft their own self-representations, but their own adherence to the values of Western culture and linguistic norms, which are in many ways more similar to the U.S.-based Etsy sellers discussed in the previous chapter than the other borrowers on Kiva. These broad similarities to Etsy posts evince the internalization of neoliberal ideologies that foreground work as a means of self-actualization, and personal responsibility versus systemic inequalities.

²¹ Work and education or school were the top variables traced for U.S. borrowers, at 2.71 and 2.57 average mentions per post. (Work and education were the 6th and 5th most used variables overall.) Also departing from non-U.S. borrowers, they emphasized entrepreneurialism, which was the fifth most prevalent variable at 1.43 average mentions per post. The most prevalent variables overall were “help” at 100 total mentions and 1.67 average mentions per profile, followed by children with 92 total mentions at 1.53 average per profile, and family at 83 total mentions or 1.38 average per profile.

Importantly, U.S. borrowers are not privy to pre-disbursal, meaning they only receive loans once their goal has been completely funded on Kiva, meaning they are completely dependent on lenders and presumably have more incentive to make appeals based on shared values. Yet these borrowers are not positioned in quite the same light as the self-fulfilling entrepreneurs of Etsy, as they are asking not just for investment through purchase, but financial assistance and empowerment. While Etsy consumers invest in figurative and literal happy objects proffered by aspirational and self-fulfilled sellers, Kiva lenders are not buying into that fulfillment through purchasing a good, but fulfilling *themselves* by helping to uplift the needy. Kiva borrowers, then, must demonstrate their adherence to Western values in order to be read as the ‘right’ kind of borrower, with U.S.-based borrowers also making claims to their own future self-fulfillment through lender investment.

Perhaps the primary difference in how Kiva borrowers are positioned as compared to other sites of microentrepreneurial exchange, is their necessary performance of need as both a marker of their authentic indigence and a means to keep them Othered, and thus temporally distant from lenders. The sense of a division between those in need of help and those who can provide it is an endemic affective charge to the site and defines the tenor of the unidirectional affective public, which is reinforced by the prevalence of this language in borrower profiles. Each profile begins with a tagline such as “A loan of \$1,600 helps to buy wood to increase his working capital and provide his family with better living conditions” (Bahrom, Tajikistan, “Arts”), or “A loan of \$1,075 helps to purchase an embroidery sewing machine to promote her sewing business” (Mehrubon,

Tajikistan, “Arts”), which is then followed by a reiteration of this language in the narrative:

Mildre is requesting a humble help in order to grow a little more with her business (Cruz Mildre, “Single Parents”)

The loan will help her very much because she will be able to continue her business (Maria Magarita, “Women”)

Bahrom hopes for your support and mercy (Bahrom, “Arts”)

He hopes to have your support and improve his family’s living conditions (Said, “Arts”)

This loan is special because: It empowers women through group lending (Amazonas Group, “Arts”).

In each of these instances, the borrower is framed as needing “help” or “support” through a loan which will also empower them, grow their business, or improve their “family’s living conditions”. Each of these examples highlights the personal impact the loan will have on the individual’s life, while also performing their docility and gratitude, with Mildre requesting “humble help” and Bahrom asking not just for support, but “mercy” as well. The use of language that reaffirms the performance of indigence maintains the uneven power dynamic between the borrower and lender; the lender is assured that they are ‘doing good’ and acting as a savior for the borrower, giving them an affective sense of value and self-fulfillment.

The performance of poverty as a claim to authenticity and disparate construction of borrower and lender, understood as need versus ability to give, are reinforced through images that convey a connection between the poverty of an image and poverty of means. The borrower images are typically of poor quality and often remove the borrower from the space of their labor situating them less as a worker and more as embodying poverty and deserving of pity and charity. The identity construction of non-U.S. Kiva borrowers “takes shape through the establishment of categories of difference precisely through a sustained representation of the borrower as fairly vulnerable. At work here is a practice of unidirectional cross-cultural encounters which encourages and reinforces a Westernized gaze at the ‘third world,’ but implicitly – and even unintentionally – denies respect and empowerment for the borrower” (Gajjala, et al., p. 889-90). The Westernized gaze at the ‘third world’ represented by Kiva borrowers here is accomplished through a unidirectional understanding of poverty’s representation – the same process by which an affective public is constructed in Kiva. In other words, the images of borrowers perform poverty in a way that fits with Western preconceived notions of indigence and the racialized Other, affirming their position of domination as well as their capacity to feel pity for the needy borrowers.

The Westernized gaze used to construct borrowers as in need through images prioritizes borrowers’ docility and poverty through borrowers’ lack of engagement with the camera, and thus the audience, as they are ultimately “not shown as active and in control but rather as passive and waiting” (Gajjala, et al. p. 887). Borrower photos typically lack action, showing the borrower passively facing the camera, often seeming

almost caught off guard by the camera, as opposed to the professional and polished look of the numerous images that punctuate Etsy features.²² Despite these borrowers' identification as entrepreneurs, that is distinctly not their positioning through these images, which rely more distinctly on an affective appeal of pity and fetishization of poverty. The images of Enelagi, Sang and Jackeline Beatriz emphasize their bereft state, with no visual clues to their business included. Enelagi is shown outside, standing along a dirt road with clothes hanging from a tree behind her. She faces the camera, but does not make eye contact with the viewer, standing rather passively looking ahead into the distance. Despite wearing a clean new shirt and a bun in her hair, the cues around Enelagi lead her to be read as impoverished and lacking control of her surroundings. Again, without context, she is unlikely to be read as an entrepreneur making traditional Samoan designs, but rather as an older, non-Western woman living in poverty. Sang similarly lacks the typical signals of Western entrepreneurialism, as she sits on a table outside with another woman, facing the camera, her dusty feet dangling in the dirt. It is unclear what this makeshift space is used for – particularly as Sang is a construction worker requesting money to buy a motorcycle – but its haphazard appearance signals her (and possibly her community members') impoverished status. The image of Jackeline Beatriz similarly removes her from the context of her labor (she is seeking money to rent a plot of land to cultivate) as she is shown in an enclosed area that is disheveled and may be a storage

²² Of the sample analyzed, photos were most likely to be of the borrower alone (70.7%), inside a building (60.3%), unsmiling (65.5%), and looking at the camera (96.6%). Only approximately one third (32.8%) of borrowers smiled at the camera, while 20.7% were displaying their goods. These numbers are in direct contrast to the visual representation of Etsy sellers, who were typically shown smiling, in their workspace, and generally engaging the camera and enticing their reader.

space, and with a distinctly poor-quality image. The visual cues in each of these images signal the women's poverty and need, and paired with their stories, engender an affective response of pity, if not morbid curiosity, from potential lenders. Yet, it is key that borrowers not be framed as utterly incapable of providing for themselves, as that would negate the imperative to invest in these entrepreneurs and instead from them as seeking straightforward charity or welfare, which is in direct contrast to neoliberal ideals.



Figure 23. Enelagi, "Arts"



Figure 24. Sang, "Single Parents"



Figure 25. Jackeline Beatriz, "Single Parents"

Borrower narratives and images (as a whole) must perform the personal responsibility of the borrowers and affirm that they have a strong work ethic that lenders can support. The performance of this capacity and drive to work marks borrowers as authentic entrepreneurs rather than fulfilling the neoliberal stereotype of a lazy, racialized

Other. Alignment with this moral directive – an individualized responsibility to provide for oneself and family through labor – allows the images and their concomitant narratives to circulate as happy objects through the affective public, as, unlike need, lenders can relate to this project:

Ziyauddin is a responsible 62-year-old man from Kumsangir, Tajikistan. He is married and is the caring father of his 7 wonderful children... He loves his profession very much (Ziyauddin, “Arts”)

Get to know Bahrom, an honest and very responsible man from Dj. Rasulov, Tajikistan. He was born in 1975, is married and is a careful father of his 2 young children. He is very hardworking and always tries to provide good living conditions (Bahrom, “Arts”)

Bafel is an ambitious man who is always trying hard to develop his business and improve his family's living conditions (Bafel, “Arts”)

She is a very hardworking woman who, day after day, seeks the means to earn her own income and thus support her husband with household expenses (Genny Amada, “Women”)

I was born and raised in The South Bronx to a single mother who raised me to the best of her ability... She stressed faith, education, hard work, humility, respect and giving back. I have worked numerous jobs in my 38 years on this earth. My other, as well as her parents and 13 siblings, were sharecroppers on a plantation in North Carolina so that strong work ethic was instilled in me. My environment was rough but there were good hard

working [sic] individuals who wanted better for themselves and families that's [sic] what drove them to endure and push forward (Roshawn, USA).

In each of these instances, borrowers are described alternatively as either “responsible” or “hardworking” and engaging these key neoliberal ideals. Both Bahrom and Bafel are also described as ‘trying’ to provide for their families, with Ziyauddin also described as loving “his profession very much” affirming that these borrowers are both invested in their labor and doing so to the betterment of not only their conditions, but those of their families. In addition to being discussed as a value, borrowers’ work ethic is also demonstrative of individuals’ capacity to overcome, or be successful in spite of their intersectional identity markers as evinced in the example of Roshawn, a U.S.-based borrower. Aside from noting the strength of his familial bond and a veiled reference to historical systems of racism, the most prevalent theme across Roshawn’s story is the value of work and having a strong work ethic. Roshawn’s story, along with his photo, presents a narrative that pushes back against racist stereotypes and history, which are only presented through cues that signal his positioning within a matrix of oppression. Roshawn notes “hard work” alongside other prominent values in his life, which he reaffirms in discussing his family’s past work as sharecroppers, a position typically held by former slaves and which arguably perpetuated racial and socioeconomic inequalities. He then insists that despite his “rough” upbringing in the South Bronx, many people were “hard working” and wanted better for themselves, hinting at racist stereotypes of indigent blacks living in urban areas. While Roshawn hints at these systemic inequalities and histories, he positions himself as personally responsible for his own success, which is possible through hard work – not

systemic change – which only further serves to individualize collectively experienced disparities. The potential Western lender is interpellated by these various cues without needing interpretation, creating an affective shortcut of connectivity, increasing the likelihood of lending as Roshawn is able to demonstrate his work ethic and desire to overcome a difficult – and individual – life position.

Images likewise perform the personal responsibility and work ethic of borrowers, as they are shown working, but also importantly in impoverished circumstances or poor-quality images that showcase their seeming unhappiness in their situation, as they are typically unsmiling and lacking enthusiasm in their activity. Borrowers' demonstration of their labor serves as a further marker of their authenticity as neoliberal subjects, intertwining both their financial plight and entrepreneurialism. The images of Bahrom, Mehrubon and Souhair show the borrowers actively working in trades typically delineated by gender, and in spaces that mark their poverty. Bahrom saws wood in a workspace that lacks a floor and is made up of makeshift shelving and storage for his numerous tools along a cracked wall, which he uses in his carpentry business. By highlighting the inadequacies in Bahrom's environment, as well as his dedication to his work, he demonstrates both his need and positioning as the 'right' kind of borrower. Mehrubon and Souhair sew in spaces that mark a stark contrast to the curated workspaces of Western Etsy sellers, and similarly lack the self-satisfied expression of those sellers, further affirming their need of financial assistance. Finally, as with his narrative, Roshawn's image casts a different valence on the performance of work ethic as he is shown standing in front of a new car, imparting a sense that he is doing better for himself

than his ancestors or during his “rough” upbringing. While these borrowers are shown working and looking at the camera, their lack of expression maintains their docility and passivity, further solidifying their positioning as in need and engendering an affective response of both pity and a sense that their conditions may be improved with the provision of funds by benevolent lenders.

In each of these photos, non-U.S. borrowers are situated as outside of Western norms of entrepreneurialism, or even basic standards of living, drawing affective responses such as pity, curiosity, or sympathy from the infantilized construction of these borrowers’ presentation. While the text of borrower profiles demonstrate adherence to neoliberal ideologies of self-sufficiency that enable a sense of perceived interconnectedness with lenders, the images work to distance the borrower from the experience of lenders, ensuring that they are seen as different, as Other, and most importantly as in need. This experiential distance allows lenders to feel pity for borrowers, or curiosity at how they are able to subsist in such conditions, while the text of the narrative assures the lender that borrowers are attempting to be a neoliberal subject. At the same time, as photos focus on the ways that these borrowers and their environments fail to conform to Western standards and expectations, they become objects of derision and paternalistic intervention that reinforce Western dominance and thus a neocolonial dynamic for lenders. In their impoverished attempt at demonstrating adherence to Western ideals, the non-U.S. borrowers are firmly entrenched as the Other who is a character of vulnerability.

The Othering of these borrowers is accomplished not just through their demonstration of need vis-à-vis poverty and passive stances, but their racialization as necessarily different and exoticized. The actual racial or ethnic heritage of these borrowers is irrelevant, with their Otherness functioning as a broad stand-in that explains why they are in such positions of dire need, and necessarily at a safe temporal and spatial distance from Western lenders. While lenders may experience pity or curiosity at their circumstance, they importantly must feel unthreatened by the borrowers and their poverty, who show their impotence through their passivity, and that borrowers recognize the shamefulness and despair of their situation, which is shown through their consistently unsmiling and downtrodden expressions. Through affective cues such as unhappiness and passivity, borrowers convey the ‘right’ ideological positioning to lenders who depend on their separation from, and the Otherness of, the borrowers to affirm their own situated domination and thus encourage lending to the “less fortunate”. Despite this Othering, lenders must feel a semblance of connection to the plight of these borrowers, as evinced in their capacity to demonstrate authenticity, seen, in addition to demonstrations of need and work ethic, in their desire to provide for their families financially.



Figure 26. Bahrom, "Arts"



Figure 27. Mehrubon, "Arts"



Figure 28. Souhair, "Women"



Figure 29. Roshawn, "Kiva US"

As hinted at here, borrowers are importantly not just performing their personal responsibility and work ethic as for themselves, but also as a means to provide for their families, while also demonstrating their adherence to the expectation of a heterosexual (nuclear) family, which again circulates through this affective public as a happy object, or moral ideal.²³ The capacity for these stories to pull at lenders' heart strings inspires an affective response while affirming borrowers' alignment with neoliberal ideals and traditional Western values, orienting all parties toward the pursuit of happiness. Typical borrower narratives highlight their continued desire to provide for their families, with the

²³ There were no instances of non-heterosexual identity, partnerships or family models discussed throughout the sample.

section of “Single Parents” discussing the experience of widows or divorced women who are forced to provide for their families on their own:

This way of working enables her to generate resources to support her family financially. Her aspirations are to expand her business (Amazonas Group, “Arts”)

Now Mehrubon is asking for a loan to buy a new embroidery sewing machine. She wants to expand her business and improve the financial situation of her family (Mehrubon, “Arts”)

Said has been in this business for 35 years. He tries to improve his family's living conditions... He hopes to have your support and improve his family's living conditions (Said, “Arts”)

Aileen is a single woman. She is 28 years old with three children. She is a very hardworking entrepreneur (Aileen, “Single Parents”).

Each of these narratives gesture to a perfunctory performance of responsibility to one's family, noting that they would like to “improve” their “family's living conditions”.

Narratives often also highlight how many children they are caring for – sometimes on their own – as in the example of Aileen, a single mother in her twenties with three children to care for. The example of Aileen marries all of the markers of authenticity discussed thus far – demonstrating her need, hardworking capacity as an entrepreneur, and willingness to provide for her family. And, more than in demonstrations of need or even work ethic, potential lenders are potentially able to see their own experiences

reflected in these stories as they also presumably have families and are apt to feel for the plight of those simply attempting to provide a better life. Yet, much like the lack of discussion regarding politics or intersectional identity markers, there are no images of borrowers with their families, divorcing them from a contextualization of their lives that would complicate their simplified performance of neoliberal ideals and affective appeals for loans, limiting the conveyance of their dedication to their families to narrative descriptions.

While highlighting dedication to providing for their families brings the experience of borrowers somewhat closer to that of lenders, discussions of education in borrower stories fulfill two ideological imperatives: acknowledging the significance of education particularly for their children and their desire to provide such opportunities, and noting their own lack of education which maintains the uneven power dynamic between borrower and lender, and affirms their indigence. Yet, they are brought in line with the moral ideal, or happy object, of educational provision by espousing that they would like to ‘do better’ by their children, performing adherence to Western ideals of prioritizing educational achievement:

Jackeline has an 8th grade education. She is a single mother and her son is a minor (Jackeline Beatriz, El Salvador, “Single parents”)

Mildre is a 21 year old single mother... Mildre wants a better future for her 5 year old son. For this reason she is working hard to finish her high school. She attends school in the evenings, and during the day she works as a daily laborer and raises pigs (Cruz Mildre, Ecuador, “Single parents”)

María sadly did not have the opportunity to study. She is a single mother and her children are now independent (María Colomba, El Salvador, “Arts”)

The women in the Trust Bank are keenly aware of the value of a good education. Although they have little or none, they are determined that their children go to school (Las Joyas Group, “Arts”)

Aileen has been in this business for three years. She would like to save enough money so she could afford to send her children to college (Aileen, “Single Parents”).

Almost all of these stories note the women’s own level or lack of formal education, marking them as worthy of pity or admiration for becoming an entrepreneur despite this disadvantage. Unlike traditional banking, the admission of this factor makes the women *more* appealing as borrowers, as opposed to high-risk investments. Additionally, as each of these women’s stories note their own lack of education, they are quick to point out how they are each working to do ‘better’ by their own children. The performative aspect of their construction is particularly clear as it is “sad” that María “did not have the opportunity to study” and the women of Las Joyas Group “are keenly aware of the value of a good education”. The language indicates an awareness of their disadvantage and reaffirms their uneven power dynamic with Western lenders as well as their desire to adhere to Western norms regarding the importance of education vis-à-vis their children. Overall, the borrowers’ lack of education and fulfillment of other Western ideals, but

awareness of its significance, affirms the neocolonial dynamic perpetuated throughout the site; borrowers, in their subordinate position, must demonstrate both their financial need and attempts to align themselves with the cultural and economic structure of their benefactors. Such attempts allow lenders to invest in borrowers both financially and affectively, perpetuating the dynamics of the affective public and site itself.

While present on the site to achieve the same end – microloans to support entrepreneurial or educational goals, U.S. and non-U.S. borrowers' images and narratives often rely on different affects and ideological positionings to meet their goals and engender the support of potential lenders. U.S. borrowers' framing engenders a sense of empathy and excitement, rather than sympathy, pity or curiosity, as they are attuned to the same cultural and linguistic norms of lenders. Western lenders are more able to perceive a connection with these borrowers, who not only share cultural norms, but who are actively taking charge of their circumstances and empowering themselves, as opposed to the non-U.S. borrowers who passively wait to be empowered through Western intervention, or paternalism. Despite their actual racial or ethnic heritage, U.S. borrowers are collapsed into a class of similarity to Western lenders, as opposed to the non-U.S. borrowers who are raced as Other and potentially filling racialized stereotypes of laziness and general inability. In each case, however, the borrowers must rely on crafting a perceived connection with lenders – not unlike Etsy sellers – through appeals that reflect hegemonic neoliberal ideologies and affects.

As noted above, the style of U.S. borrower profiles reflects similarities to the narrative construction of Etsy seller profiles in many ways, not the least because U.S.

borrowers are able to write their own profiles, unlike non-U.S. borrowers. This affordance demonstrates a lack of mediation between the borrower and lender (as lenders also *do* lend directly to U.S. borrowers), in addition to an enhanced capacity for U.S. borrowers to discuss their life position, political beliefs, race and gender. However, the increased control of their narrative remains situated within a capitalist framework; borrowers' position as fledgling entrepreneurs is not in opposition to existing political economic structures, but is supported by and supports them. Many of these profiles highlight the ways that structural inequalities such as racism and sexism can be eradicated through capitalism, not in spite of this system, which ultimately reinforces existing forms of power and domination. Indeed, the totality of U.S. borrower profiles affirm capitalism and neoliberal ideologies, privileging an individualistic perspective regarding inequality of opportunities and entrepreneurialism, espoused through exuberant language.

Unlike non-U.S. borrowers who do not write their own narratives, U.S. borrowers perform affective labor in their participation in the affective public seen in their expressions of exuberance and passion for their work, as well as ownership of their narratives, which are written in the first-person perspective. This differential framing reflects, much like Etsy seller narratives, how the subjects of post-Fordist work must take on "passionate work," as U.S. borrowers tend to emphasize their passion for their business, as well as situating their entrance into entrepreneurship as part of a journey of self-actualization, in addition to loving their work and following their dreams, reflecting post-Fordist tendencies to use feminized language in describing the collapse of leisure

and work into a singular source of identification. By utilizing emotive cues, these borrowers' appeals relied more on perceived connectedness, or shared experiences with lenders, to create an affective connection that would lend itself to an economic exchange:

I have a passion for all things relating to the construction industry (Tina, USA, "Women").

In 2015, craving more experience and following my heart, I decided to move to Paris, France... I decided to follow my passion in photography and connected with tourists and photographed them around iconic Parisian sites... This loan would change my life by allowing me to continue to follow my dreams as an artist and work with my hands creating art for people. Either being behind a camera lens or kneading concrete to make marbled planters, I am fulfilled by creating art. (Akeem, USA, "Arts").

After experiencing being pushed out of a company I dedicated myself to for 5 years educating myself through college, and getting fired at a start-up company, I realized that I no longer wanted to be a puppet for any other organization. It was time to make an investment in myself and my family that would pay off while using all of the knowledge I had previously gained (Angel, USA, "Women").

Tina, a woman working in a male-dominated industry, asserts her right to pursue this work through her "passion for all things" construction, mirroring Akeem's decision to 'follow his passion' in photography through a temporary stay in another country. In each of these instances, the borrowers use their identification with their work as a "passion," or innate element of their being, to legitimize their pursuit and thus their request for funds.

Angel, conversely, does not describe a passion for cleaning (her business), but rather how her history of struggle and finding herself in the wrong positions eventually led her to finding her fit as an entrepreneur. She, like Akeem and many others, frame their narrative as a journey that has finally led them to the best fit for them, and which in many ways *is* them, collapsing their selves into their labor. These borrowers' ability to pursue their passion aligns them with the ideal of living authentically, and brings lenders into proximity of this idealized happy object, which they can affirm through a loan.

In addition to affirming post-Fordist worker models, U.S. borrower stories also reinforce the hegemony of capitalism and how their businesses may work to fight inequalities within this rubric. Unlike the stories of non-U.S. borrowers that take a subordinate position within neocolonialism, these narratives perform a continued allegiance to capitalism as the site for change, which positions them as 'change agents' and brings them in line with Western ideals and the shared values of lenders:

A passionate sustainability activist – I wanted to bring a zero waste [sic] ethos into creating goods for wedding and home décor (Meghan, USA, "Arts").

From the start, we have consistently produced plays by women and people of color. When we started, few were doing what we are doing... Representation matters (Jenn, USA, "Women").

I was pretty anti-capitalist in my youth and thought that the whole system needed to be taken down in order to create more justice and sustainability in the world. After working in the real world for a while, however, I have

come to see capitalism as a tool that need not be used for destructive or greedy purposes (Shayna, USA, “Women”).

Shayna’s story presents not only her personal political stance, but – like Meghan and Jenn – her own privilege in possessing the language and education required to make such a judgment, the capacity to actively choose to participate in and support capitalism, and the media literacy required to frame this ethos as part of her brand. By drawing on these elements in tandem, each of these women is able to draw affective connections through perceived interconnectedness and the interpellation of lenders vis-à-vis shared norms (Abidin, 2015). At the same time, capitalism is framed as a necessary “tool” in creating “more justice and sustainability” assuring potential lenders that this systems in the answer to poverty alleviation, not its structural cause. Such a framing affirms U.S. borrowers’ authenticity as capitalist and neoliberal subjects and coheres the affective public around the shared investment in these political economic and ideological projects.

Along with their narratives, the photos of U.S. borrowers produce differential affective engagements as they perform their identities as entrepreneurs more than the indigence and Otherness of non-U.S. borrowers. Non-U.S. borrower narratives must convey a sense of dedication to work as a means to support one’s family, while U.S. borrowers more consistently rely on demonstrating their entrepreneurial journey as a means of overcoming struggle – not unlike the structure of Etsy features. In images, non-U.S. borrowers are largely represented as the racialized Other due to their extreme poverty, yet U.S. borrowers cannot occupy this position, due to their literal and cultural proximity to lenders. Their images, then, tend to highlight their happiness in work, as

they are shown smiling and actively engaging in tasks tied to their business. U.S. borrowers are shown actively engaging in work, often while smiling at the camera, and demonstrating their professional capacities through possessing and utilizing proper equipment. Compared to the passive, waiting stance of non-U.S. borrowers, these women are mobile, presenting themselves as in motion and always already working, or, as fulfilling the requirements of neoliberal subjectivity. Tina, for example, has a “passion” for construction, which is demonstrated through her activity on the job site and her possession of not only the proper tools, but a wide, open smile. This is in direct contrast to Sang (discussed above) who is also a construction worker, but who is shown passively looking at the camera while she is perched on a plank table outdoors. The same active engagement with the camera and their work is visible with Shayna, Angel and Megan who are shown in their workspaces, surrounded by tools and other visual cues of their business and ability to support themselves. By highlighting how these borrowers are happy and capable, they are distinctly *not* shown as impoverished or needy, but as requiring support to grow their existing business. In other words, it is not the destitution of these borrowers that is highlighted, but their capacity as entrepreneurs. Supporting such passionate workers orients both borrowers and lenders toward the happy objects that represent the good life and affirm the affective public.



Figure 30. Tina, "Women"



Figure 31. Shayna, "Women"



Figure 32. Angel, "Women"



Figure 33. Meghan, "Arts"

The necessity for borrowers (both U.S. and non) to affirm the values and ideological investments of lenders – and for lenders to perform this investment for each other – as a means to demonstrate authenticity becomes clearer in the context of how lenders represent themselves in response to the few prompts available in their own profiles. As mentioned above, lenders are granted significant latitude in their self-representation, with the option to include a small thumbnail photo and respond to the prompts “About Me,” “Occupation,” “Location,” and “I loan because”. Lenders’ responses reflect the performance of neoliberal ideologies, including their approach to poverty alleviation, and affirmation of capitalism as a system that affords them the

capacity to empower others. While lenders are certainly willing to “help” borrowers with microloans, they are ultimately concerned that borrowers demonstrate their own willingness to help themselves alongside this empowerment, signaling enduring racist stereotypes of people of color seeking handouts, being lazy, or becoming the “welfare queen”:

I loan because: I want to help others that want to help themselves
(Benjamin, “[A+] Atheists...”)

I loan because: I want to see individuals empowered to create brighter futures for themselves, their families, and surrounding community members (Elisha Hodgson, “InsideFlyer”)

I loan because: I want to empower people and create opportunities (Maria, Team Captain, “Kiva Christians”)

I loan, through Kiva, because it is not giving alms, but helping people empower and help themselves (Thomas, Team Captain, “[A+] Atheists...”).

Benjamin’s response clarifies that he wants to help those who “want to help themselves,” while Thomas affirms that Kiva is not about “giving alms”, or handouts, but providing a stepping-stone for people to ultimately support themselves. Loans are importantly framed not as charity, but as empowering borrowers allowing lenders to “feel satisfaction about lending... [as] part of this satisfaction derives precisely from the idea that one is helping others to help themselves (rather than providing charity), a centerpiece of neoliberal

approaches to poverty alleviation” (Moodie, p. 291-2). Not only does this ideological framing affirm the very system that has led to such widespread poverty, but it clarifies why borrower stories perpetuate neocolonial divides as they highlight such specific elements of their identity; lenders themselves make clear that they are only interested in supporting those borrowers who demonstrate their commitment to helping themselves, their families, and their communities through work and education. Similarly, situating microlending as a way to empower others individualizes poverty and its solutions, which reinforces the notion that individuals are personally responsible for their own life circumstances, not the multifold forms of oppressions and inequalities they experience. Indeed, these responses suggest that only those borrowers who demonstrate their individual departure from stereotypes are worthy of loans and extraction from poverty.

While borrowers must perform their work ethic and capacity to fall in line with neoliberal ideologies, so too do lenders demonstrate their allegiance to capitalism and the free market, seeing it as a purveyor of opportunity and the means by which borrowers could extract themselves from poverty – *not* the precise reason for growing global inequalities. Indeed, in order to avoid reflecting on systems of inequality that allow only some to be born “into comfortable living situations,” lenders adopt the mentality of “kinder capitalism,” or, “the idea that you can get rich while also helping others” (Flaherty, p. 18). This discrepant understanding of the workings of global capitalism is reflected by numerous lenders:

I loan because: Because I believe that the private sector is the main driving force in development, and that private sector is mainly made of hard-working entrepreneurs willing to make a change (Zineb, “InsideFlyer”).

I loan because: Microlending enables the creation of asymmetrical financial benefits. It is an efficient way to create a lot of good for very little cost. I can make loans that change the lives of other human beings for the better, at a cost that I can afford (Bruce, Team Captain, “[A+] Atheists...”).

I loan because: I believe that targeted lending benefits not only entrepreneurs growing businesses but also the world’s social and economic health (John, Team Captain, “NerdFighters”).

I loan because: Kiva is a great way to apply free market solutions to global problems (Zach, Team Captain, “NerdFighters”).

Zineb notes their belief that the private sector is comprised of “hard-working entrepreneurs” who are driving global development, while Bruce notes the efficiency of microlending as it can “create a lot of good for very little cost,” marking the significance that poverty alleviation be convenient and understood in terms of efficiency and cost-benefit. Zach more straightforwardly states that this system applies “free market solutions to global problems,” though it is unclear what the solution or the problem is here. Each of these lenders gesture toward the existence of global problems or inequalities, without directly addressing what those issues may be, or what has caused them – though they clearly do not see capitalism as a possible factor. Rather, the lenders focus on their

capacity to contribute to global change via capitalism, and, usefully, “at a cost that [they] can afford”. Focusing on capitalism as the solution to “global problems” with unnamed causes leaves bare the implication that it is the culture and political economic systems of these various countries that is at fault, and which must be rectified through development/the free market/capitalism. Much as with appeals to empower the individuals who wish to help themselves, this framing relies on a neocolonial dynamic that privileges the Western perspective and experience of capitalism, while the borrowers are subjugated by unstated yet persistent racist stereotypes that there are indeed some individuals who do *not* wish to help themselves and who subsist in societies which are inherently inferior to those which rely on capitalism and its citizens who *do* demonstrate personal responsibility.

Lenders also affirm capitalism as a system that inherently allows any hardworking individual to be successful – not a structural roadblock to equitable financial stability – through reciprocity, or their ability to identify (however misguidedly) with borrowers through the perception of shared struggle. Many lenders discuss that they were led to Kiva as a way to ‘give back,’ or pay forward the help they received from others that enabled them to overcome their own struggles. This framing obfuscates how their struggles are structurally different from and incomparable to those they are now ‘helping,’ and instead flattens all perceptions of financial difficulty into the same experience, which allows lenders to further extol the personal satisfaction they receive from their ability to give back, or their capacity to tout their personal success in a public forum:

I loan because: People have helped me, now I can help others (Mari Anne & Roger, “Kiva Christians”)

About me: Nothing special. 65 yrs old. Interesting, albeit bumpy, life. Back on track for the last 21 years. Loving my life and interested in giving back what was so freely given to me (Elizabeth E., “The Mindful Bunch”)

I loan because: I want to help as many people as possible. I LOVE my life right now, I am so grateful to be living overseas in India. I am so happy, so i think this is an important way to give back. If I’m happy, then I have to give back to show gratitude (Jordan, “InsideFlyer”)

I loan because: Those of us born by chance into comfortable living situations need to share our luck. It’s also very satisfying to lend, get repaid, then lend again (Heather, Team Captain, “[A+] Atheists…”).

I loan because: It makes me very happy to help make more opportunities available to those who are less fortunate than me (Kevin Li, Team Captain, “NerdFighters”).

Alternatively noting that “people have helped me,” they are “giving back what was so freely given to me,” and “I have to give back to show gratitude,” these strikingly similar sentiments highlight the performative nature of lenders’ gratitude, as each of them feel compelled to note that they are doing well and thus have a responsibility to provide for others as well. By consistently discussing their own past struggles (whatever they may be), lenders are able to imagine that the struggles borrowers face are not unlike their own,

and can also be rectified on the individual level. As a corollary to the idea that individuals are personally responsible for their socioeconomic position, Heather's response frames it as "luck" that perpetuates inequalities, not political economic systems, while Kevin gestures vaguely toward such systemic differences in noting "those who are less fortunate than me". Their emphasis on poverty as a result of luck imagines that such discrepancies can be rectified through means that have a mutual benefit to both the fortunate (affective) and unfortunate (monetary) parties. Additionally, Heather describes how the lender receives an affective reward not just through making a single microloan, but through the cyclical process of lending, seeing their money returned, and then lending again. While the lenders are interested in making "more opportunities" for the "less fortunate," they are also perpetuating this system of inequality as they require more loan opportunities be available to them to receive an increased and enduring affective reward. Indeed, charity is situated as the responsibility of the (grateful and successful) individual, negating the need for social welfare or larger political economic shifts. This individualizing of systemic issues and refusal to engage social welfare, which is steadily being stripped from state responsibility, reflects how the neoliberal approach to charity "it reduces the discomfort evoked by visible destitution in our midst by creating the illusion of effective action and offering us myriad ways of participating in it. It... legitimates personal generosity as a response to major social and economic dislocation" (Flaherty, quoting Janet Poppendieck, p. 24). While the borrower stories and images are meant to evoke affective sentiments such as pity and sympathy, the cultural logic of neoliberal approaches to

charity comfortably situates these instances of extreme poverty as rectifiable through easy and fulfilling action.

In addition to affirming capitalism and the neoliberal model of charity through performances of gratitude, lenders also directly note the affective rewards that they receive from lending, framing it not just as an individualized solution to poverty, but an individual benefit to themselves. The consistent affirmation of such sentiments and positive reinforcements toward giving solidifies the affective public of Kiva, ensuring that people continue to invest in others and receive an emotional return on their investment. While lenders certainly hope to be ‘doing good’ while affirming systems of domination, their own personal fulfillment serves as a key motivator and marker of their authenticity as someone who does good:

I loan because: we all need to be the change we want to see, but mostly for the warm fuzzies (Bronwyn, “[A+] Atheists...”)

I loan because: it’s soul tax. i’d rather impulse splurge on hope (Melissa, “InsideFlyer”)

I loan because: I enjoy it and hope it does some good (Sharon, Team Captain, “NerdFighters”)

I loan because: We are all part of the same thing. Each person is just another part of me. When I do something for them, I do it for me. It really is as simple, and as beautiful, as that (James Riley, MD, “The Mindful Bunch”).

Each of these lenders note not only the personal benefit they receive from providing microloans, but specifically that this benefit is affective. James Riley directly states that when doing something for someone else, he is really doing it for himself, while the others frame their experience as somewhat less straightforwardly selfish, with Bronwyn stating that they mostly provide loans for “the warm fuzzies,” or a distinctly internal and bodily experience brought on simply by imagining one’s actions are doing “some good” (as Sharon put it). Melissa similarly conveys the affective element of this exchange, describing her lending as “soul tax,” or a spiritual economic pursuit, wherein she is purchasing the affective quality of “hope” for borrowers. Without necessarily putting their lending in spiritual or religious terms, each of these lenders balance the moral and affective rewards they receive, situating microlending as both personally fulfilling *and* a righteous endeavor. In this way, the “warm fuzzies” or “soul tax” of lending circulates as a happy object, orienting lenders toward happiness and aligning them with authenticity, as they perform the role of benevolent benefactor.

Lender profiles make clear that it is through capitalism, a system from which they have personally benefited, that poverty will be alleviated for Kiva borrowers and affective rewards received for themselves. The strong ideological underpinnings of the various sentiments expressed by lenders reflects not only what is of value to Western lenders, but what performative positions are available to borrowers, who must appeal to this particular audience. Borrowers, and the editors who craft their stories, are incentivized to mirror the particular stances of lenders in order to secure funds, and thus become complicit in the perpetuation of “kinder capitalism,” if not their own destitution.

This necessity makes clear why borrowers are discouraged from, or unable to, discuss the particulars of their life positioning including culture and religion or political stance, as they are to be presented to lenders as simply hardworking, deserving, and entrepreneurial – the textual and visual embodiment of neoliberal ideals.

This chapter has examined how the affective matrix of neoliberal ideologies and affects functions in the specific iteration of Kiva, encouraging lenders to dole out money, and ensuring that borrower profiles perform according to expectations (and receive funds). The spaces of Kiva (primarily borrower and lender profiles) situate users within a hierarchical dynamic that affirms Western lenders as successful neoliberal citizens who are in a self-affirming position to ‘give back,’ with non-U.S. borrowers positioned as exoticized Others who are in need of the paternalistic intervention of Westerners, and their funds. This differential positioning affirms an affective public that is less focused on engaging disparate populations across the globe than it is in affirming lenders’ structurally dominant positionality through an atmosphere of philanthropy and feeling good about doing good, while performing these responses for each other. The site, and the constructed borrower profiles, are designed to affirm lenders’ successful embodiment of neoliberal citizenship, and thus each party’s authenticity. The markers of authenticity in Kiva are distinctly performative happy objects tied to moral discourses that privilege those quality that align with neoliberal ideologies and the imagined values of Western lenders, framing this neoliberal form of charity as a project of neocolonialism, or the use of capitalism and cultural imperialism to indirectly rule subjugated populations. U.S.-based borrowers straddle a unique position, as they are forced to perform their indigence

and adherence to neoliberal ideals, but also are afforded the latitude to construct their own narratives, which fall as much in line with the ideological imperatives to lead an authentic life of passionate entrepreneurial pursuit as it does with an appropriate show of gratitude for the benefaction of Kiva lenders. The affective public of Kiva, then, coheres around lenders and their self-fulfillment as well as reflection of their own neoliberal ideals through borrower profiles, ensuring the circulation of feelings associated with their attainment of the good life and their perhaps misguided hope that that “warm fuzzies” will bring similar success to entrepreneurs the world over.

4. Twitch: Selling Access and Exclusivity

Twitch is a pioneer in the esports and live streaming industry, and as it attempts to affirm its identity within the emergent milieu it has established, its affective public has been defined by the income-generating labor of streamers, content creation labor of audience members as chat participants, and the misogyny and racism associated with gamer culture and its predominantly white male user base. Streamers (and to some extent audience members) perform their authenticity as gamers and members of Twitch's affective public through adherence to rigid standards of traditional gender and exoticized racial identity, as well as the necessity of demonstrating a high level of game play that is compensated through a matrix of followers, teams and prize winnings. These standards of authenticity are largely framed around geek masculinity, or a performance of gender characterized by displays of expertise, knowledge and skill in gaming that is used to both build connections and exclude the uninitiated (Braithwaite, p. 2), often through toxic and violent attacks. The deployment of these identity markers is framed within an emergent pushback against the curated 'authenticity' of spaces such as Etsy or Instagram, with the performance of geek masculinity and sexual availability of women paradoxically being policed in a public that perceives its users as more 'real' and authentic because of their constant availability to their audience through streaming and social media platforms,

which allow for unscripted and unfiltered interactions with their followers. Streamers adhere to (or draw satirical attention to) the strict gendered and racialized norms of the platform and devote their full selves as sites of labor in order to be viewed as authentic, and thus deserving of audience members' donations and subscriptions – the means of subsistence for this emergent group of microentrepreneurs. Those streamers who fail to perform their masculinity, sexually available femininity or racialization are vulnerable to various forms of both online and real-world attacks from other streamers, gamers or viewers, marking the high stakes of meeting audience demands while forging a career that marries labor with leisure through gaming. The norms of Twitch's affective public demand particular forms of self-representation and interaction, while aligning users with authenticity and the 'good life' – affective structures that are associated with being the 'right' kind of raced and gendered individual, or gamer.

Streamers pursue self-fulfillment and the good life through 'doing what they love,' or gaming – an activity traditionally associated with leisure, but which has emerged as a prominent site of possibility for young adults who face a lack of stable, full-time employment options due to post-Fordist neoliberalism, which instead privileges the individualized pursuit of passionate and precarious labor. Streamers perform their authenticity as they engage aspirational labor, a "mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated idea of *getting paid to do what you love*" (Duffy, 2017, p. 4-6), which orients themselves, and by extension their audience members, toward happy objects, or those figurative and literal objects that are directed toward happiness and self-fulfillment as a project. Within Twitch, such objects

include the possibility of pursuing a career in gaming – a once laughable proposition that has become increasingly lucrative for an elite few through a combination of Twitch streams, sponsorships and winnings from esports competitions, as well as the digital objects that audience members can procure as a symbol of their monetary dedication to individual streamers – personalized emotes and emojis, which are often designed specifically for and by streamers to represent the insular nature of their stream, or micro affective public. Despite streamers’ pursuit of getting paid to do what they love including investment of time well beyond a 40-hour work week in playing games, streaming and developing their celebrity through multiple social media platforms and public appearances, video game play and Twitch streaming are largely negated as sites of (value-producing) labor, reinforcing the precarious status of these streamers and their lack of workplace protections including not just basics such as a minimum wage or sick leave, but also protection against various forms of abuse.

While the broad affective public of Twitch brings together millions of users largely through a shared passion for gaming, it is also, somewhat paradoxically, extremely divisive and coheres around shared and amplified negative sentiments and forms of harassment as much as celebrations of gameplay or various individuals’ success.²⁴ As more women, people of color and LGBTQ individuals become prominent in Twitch and gaming, white men and audience members adhering to masculine standards of conduct assert their (waning) dominance through gender and race-based

²⁴ As an attempt to thwart growing gender-based tensions, Twitch introduced IRL (In Real Life) as a streaming category in 2016, giving streamers a space to stream other activities without facing criticism that they aren’t ‘real’ gamers. While this category has grown in popularity, it has not ended gender-based harassment on the platform.

attacks, meaning the “male fixation on bodies is thus instrumental rather than incidental” (Sobieraj, 2018), or a primary and purposed means of attacking those individuals considered not to ‘belong’ in the community. Identity-based attacks are perpetuated not just because minority groups are considered outsiders to gaming, but because of their imagined encroachment on this supposedly white, cisgender and heterosexual male space; ‘outsiders’ are allowed entrance so long as they conform to traditional and hegemonic norms of gender and racial self-representation and hierarchy. Yet, when individuals fail to adhere to these constructed ideas of normativity, they become vulnerable to attacks that attempt to remove them from and police the ‘authenticity’ of the platform as a site for ‘real’ gamers. At the same time, gender and raced-based attacks are effective and enduring not just because they reflect and amplify existing Western norms and inequities, but because the negative affects associated with these practices circulate and become attached to persons and spaces and cohere in the digital crowd, particularly as communication within Twitch is rapid and persistent. The streamers of Twitch, then, are neoliberal subjects in so far as they embody the shift to post-Fordist precarious labor forms, as well as the contemporary gender retraditionalization explored in Etsy, though with decidedly more violent tendencies here.

This chapter will examine the constitutive elements of Twitch’s affective matrix that facilitate a connection between streamers and audience members and thus an economic exchange, seen in donations and subscriptions. I will begin by situating Twitch as a site of labor within the emergent industry of esports and outlining how Twitch streams logistically operate, including the usage of live video feeds and chat window

functions during the “Just Chatting” segment of streams – the primary focus of analysis. Such a grounding provides a foundation to argue that Twitch functions as an affective public that converges around happy objects and their ideological association with the pursuit of aspirational labor and the good life as evinced in streamers’ participation in a saturated attention economy, paired with the policing of the gamer identity. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to analyzing how the specific markers of authenticity – high level gameplay, whiteness, geek masculinity, and feminine sexual availability – are performed and policed in video and chat, constituting forms of affective labor on the part of all users, that coheres the affective public and engenders a sense of connection that encourages economic transactions or giving.

Twitch has emerged as a key element of the esports industry, providing a platform for viewers to interact with and champion gamers, who compete globally in competitions for staggering prize winnings and for the sponsorships from a multitude of brands. While the first broadcast of a gaming competition occurred in 2006, a sustained following was not established until Twitch’s launch in 2011, which encouraged gamer and audience engagement (Sager, 2019) and eventually the elevation of gamers to the status of prominent athletes and celebrities. While some have debated whether gaming constitutes a sport, there is growing evidence and popular support for this claim and industry, as esports have their own governing body, the Electronic Sports League (ESL) and in 2017 it was reported that the International Olympics Committee was considering adding esports as an Olympic event (Sager, 2019). Esports teams are also beginning to rival more traditional sports in terms of earning power; in late 2018 Cloud9 became the

world's most valuable esports team with a valuation of \$310 million, while another nine esports teams were valued over \$100 million and have attracted the investment of well-known sports investors such as Michael Jordan and Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots (Pei, 2019). Viewership of esports has also rapidly increased, with the 2018 League of Legends World Championship final drawing nearly 100 million unique views, compared to the 103 million viewers of the 2018 Super Bowl. The similarity between esports and other traditional sports does not end with the industries' capacity to earn players and companies money, but can also be seen in esports' likewise reliance on performances of masculinity that "usually take place in a homosocial context" in which "men look to other men for validation of their manhood" through demonstrations of violence and meritocracy (Chen Christensen, para. 8-11). Twitch has become the cultural and economic cornerstone of a growing industry, with high stakes for streamers and gamers in terms of earning power, as well as the setting of norms and standards of conduct and interaction.

Twitch is distinct from both Etsy and Kiva in its focus on live video streaming and chat window interaction, as well as its dependence on donations from viewers, or audience members, in order to sustain streamers. In this way, viewers do not receive a purchased good, or promise for a return on their investment, but rather are obliged to give money to a streamer because they feel a connection to that person and are building an affective relationship with the streamer, and the broader Twitch public. Though initially envisioned as akin to reality television, the platform quickly developed into video game streaming in 2011, has grown to one of the highest sources of internet traffic in North

America (Stephenson, 2018) and boasts over 15 million daily active users, with males comprising 81.5% of their user base, and 55% of all users ranging in age between 18 to 34 (“Audience,” n.d.). Of these users, over 2.2 million stream live on Twitch each month (“Audience,” n.d.). Standing out from other streamers and competing for viewership is a high stakes arena for those who use the platform as their primary source of income, as more than 23 billion minutes of streams are watched per month (“Traffic,” n.d.), and the highest earning streamer, Ninja (Tyler Blevins), earned approximately \$500,000 per month from his roughly 250,000 paid subscribers (Herrman, 2018) before leaving the platform in July of 2019 to sign an exclusive contract with Twitch’s primary competitor, Microsoft’s Mixer. Breaking out and gaining a sustained following has been particularly difficult for women, who make up less than 10 percent of the top 500 most- followed streams (“Is It Easier to Be a Woman on Twitch?” 2015), and only 3.2% of the hours watched in those channels (“Do Women Have It Easier on Twitch?” 2017) but face a disproportionate amount of negative attention and gender-based attacks. As of July 2019, Pokimane was the most followed female streamer at number 13 overall (3,152,664 followers), with itsHafu being the most watched female, at number 58 overall (1,477,556 viewer hours in the past month). Conversely, the most followed male at that time, Ninja, had 14,633,461 followers, and the most watched male streamer, Tfue, had 8,013,660 viewer hours over the previous month (TwitchMetrics, n.d.).²⁵ In order to stand out from their more heavily viewed male counterparts and gain a footing in the esports industry,

²⁵ Data for female streamers was collected on July 10th, 2019, while data for male streamers was collected on July 19th, 2019.

some women have chosen to emphasize their physical characteristics and sexualize interactions with viewers in order to build their following, while arguably more women have been *accused* by male streamers and viewers of sexualizing the platform for profit. Such critiques situate women not as ‘real’ gamers, or authentic individuals, but as jezebels who are attempting to infiltrate the space of Twitch that is marked by particular performances of masculinity. Yet streamers of most any skill level, follower numbers, gender or race are expected to create and maintain interactions and relationships – however fleeting – with their viewers and encourage emotional as well as monetary investments in their channel.

Twitch streams operate with a particularly unique multimedia presentation in which text, audio and video are integrated, providing an all-encompassing sensory experience for viewers, unlike Etsy or Kiva, which allows audience members to perceive a connection on multiple fronts; they can see and hear what a streamer is doing live, as well as have their questions or comments addressed, and interact with other users in the stream chat. For the uninitiated, the constant inundation of various sounds, alerts, video feed, background music, and flurry of chat responses can be overstimulating, but demonstrates the lengths streamers will go to maintain the attention of viewers in their particular stream and keep them engaged – as streams can often last upwards of eight hours.²⁶ Within a given stream, the streamer is almost always visible either in the corner or in a full-screen view, alongside their shared screen of gameplay or other media, as well

²⁶ While not explicitly part of the Community Guidelines, streamers are discouraged from having “dead air” on their stream, or not being present on-screen. This may occur when a streamer leaves the room to use the restroom, get food, etc. The stream does not stop for these intermissions, and streamers are expected to return quickly lest they lose the attention and viewership of their audience.

as a real-time updated chat window featuring active viewers, and various banners displaying donation stats. The visible arrangement of a stream is often delineated by gender, with women typically allowing their image to cover the viewer's screen, while men often limit their image to a small box in a corner of the screen. While some streamers immediately begin each stream with gameplay, many others set aside time at the beginning of their stream for "Just Chatting," a category that is typically used for direct engagement and relationship building with the audience.²⁷ During this time, streamers may respond to individual questions from viewers, share videos, or tell stories, all of which is a departure from gameplay, when the streamer usually does not interact with the chat, but only other players in their live game. During this "Just Chatting" time, "the games take a backseat to the relationship formed between streamers and viewers... The relatable humanity of these interactions makes the relationship between streamers and viewers an attractive reason to visit and participate (S.L. Anderson, p. 13). In other words, the "Just Chatting" segment allows audience members the opportunity – or the excitement at the *idea* of the opportunity – to interact and build an immediate affective relationship with the streamer, who, depending on their status, may be viewed within the community as an elevated celebrity and typically unavailable to converse and play games with fans.²⁸

²⁷ Data collection focused on the "Just Chatting" category. Streamers self-identify how their stream is divided between categories such as "Just Chatting" or playing specific games. This allows users to search for streamers currently engaging in games or activities they would like to view.

²⁸ These observations are limited to the sample of top Twitch Partners, which is only moderately representative of how Twitch functions as a whole, but indicative of stream culture at the Partner level.

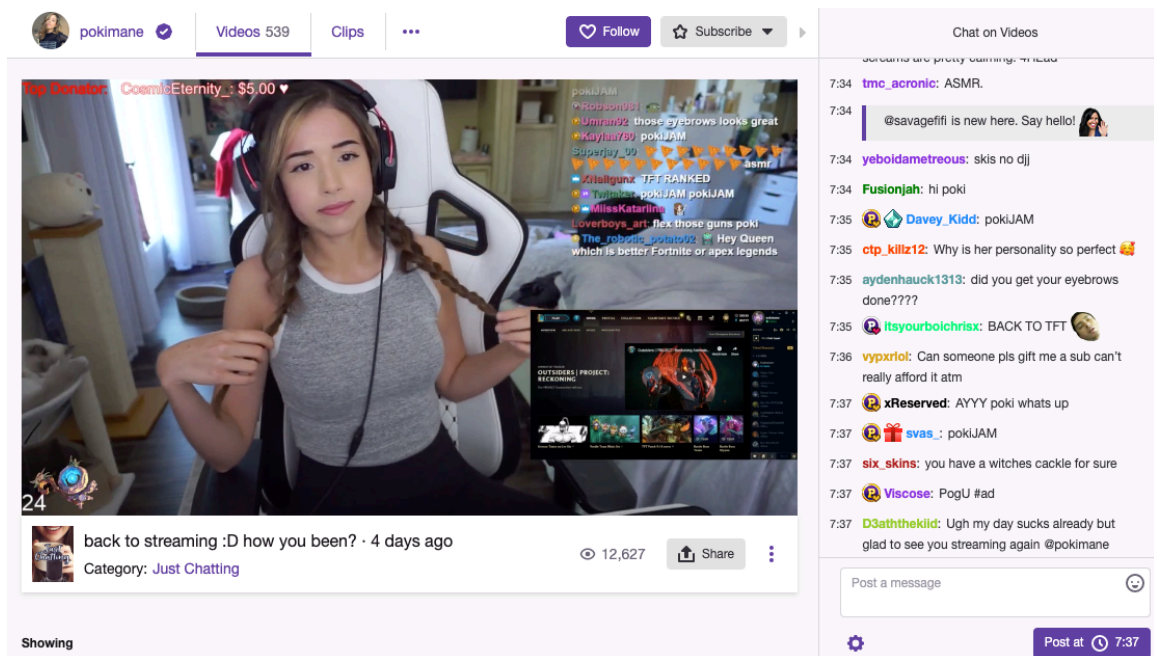


Figure 34. Pokimane

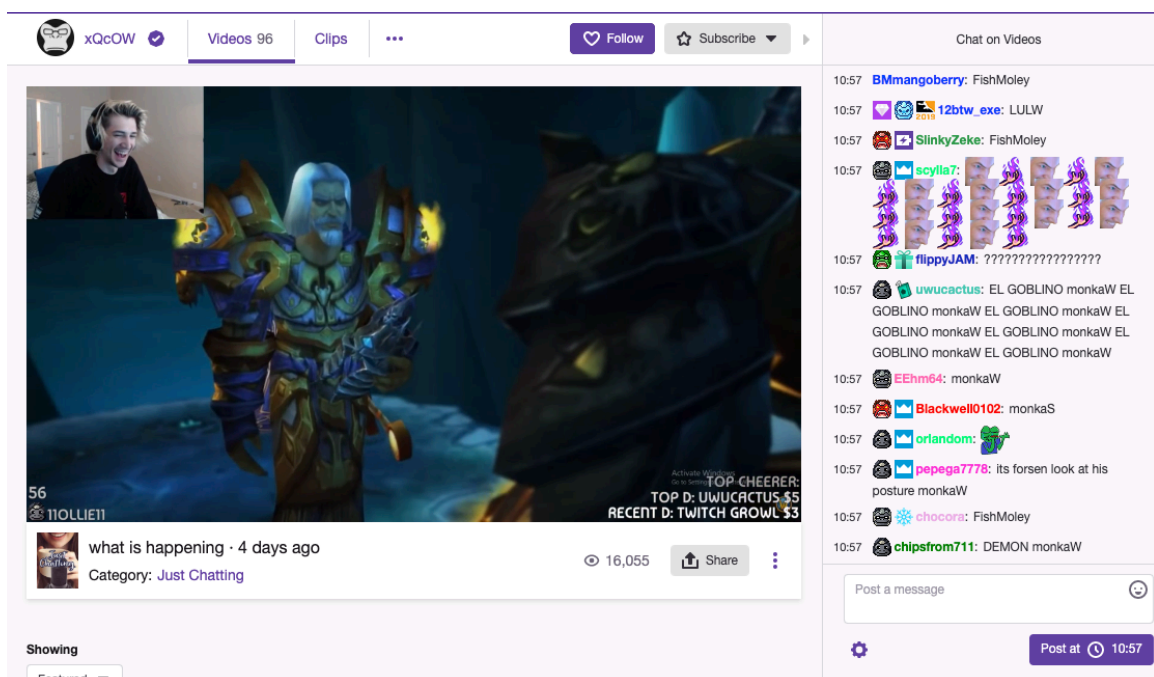


Figure 35. xQcOW

Each streamer's channel, comprised of individual streams and chats, contributes to the construction of an affective public, or networked public that is defined by the circulation of shared and amplified affective sentiments, which facilitate connections between users and encourage viewers to subscribe and donate in an attempt to become closer to the accessible celebrity of streamers. Following Habermas's formulation of a "public sphere" which fosters open dialogue regarding "matters of common concern" (Sobieraj, 2017, p. 3), Twitch functions as a digital public, with channels as micro-publics where individuals can engage on topics of specific interest and establish their own norms and cohesive perspectives (Sobieraj, 2017, p. 3). Yet the formulation of publics does not account for the highly affective dimension of these interactions, which Zizi Papacharissi defines as "affective publics," or "networked public formations that are mobilized or connected through expressions of sentiment" (Papacharissi, p. 125). Indeed, the public of Twitch is one that is simultaneously digital, micro and defined by its affective exchanges between users; the community would not persist without these resonances that engender an economic relationship between streamer and audience member, particularly when there is minimal direct interaction between the parties in more heavily trafficked streams. As users share sentiments and express their exclusive knowledge, or familiarity with the streamer and norms of their channel, they foster connections with each other based on shared knowledge, interests and adherence to norms. This process of affective expression and circulation that builds intimacy – amongst audience members and between audience members and streamers – encourages viewers to become and remain loyal to individual streamers and their micro affective

public through both investment in content creation (the chat) and donations. By donating to and possibly interacting with streamers as dedicated followers, viewers are brought in proximity with celebrity, as well as the authenticity (as gamers) and fantasy of financial success that these streamers represent.

As streamers make themselves consistently available to their audience through lengthy and daily streams, numerous opportunities arise for them to be humanized for viewers, and for an affective, if not also lasting, connection to be created within the micro affective public. Depending on their persona, streamers may discuss issues in their personal lives or politics, allowing audience members to respond in the chat and engage in an open discussion that builds a connection and points toward the ‘realness’ or authenticity of the interaction, particularly when streamers demonstrate emotion. In one example, the female streamer KatGunn begins a particular stream by crying as she discusses the death of a friend and fellow streamer the day before, and is immediately consoled by the chat participants who also knew him and could speak to his positive qualities while they encouraged her to share her feelings and feel better:

20:37 MainVato: It’s okay. Let it out.

20:41 OSBEye513: its okay

20:48 MainVato: We’re all here for you.

20:49 ryanreeves1: Sorry for your loss fam

20:59 playfreepls: c’mon just let it go

21:26 Kwolve: You’re doing a great job inspiring people
and bringing joy to peoples lives nightly. On the right path.

21:54 playfreepls: yea I get how u feel like one of my
friends died a week ago we are all from 13 to 15
22:07 OSBEye513: Ive never been good at mourning. I
tend to instead celebrate the life of an individual and let the
memories forged give me peace
22:27 Toni_iommi: @katgunn you know how i feel about
you and your community and how happy it makes me to be
here (KatGunn, 2019b).

Chat participants and KatGunn herself break from discussions largely limited to gaming and sponsorships to share their own stories about the passed streamer, as well as how they individually deal with grief and offers of support; KatGunn's overt display of raw emotion reads as a break from her typically cocky and upbeat attitude and draws the participants together in a shared moment of emotion. This instance, among others, demonstrate how streamers establish affective micro publics that function multi-directionally – with the viewers providing emotional support to the streamers, and these investments in each other's lives enabling streamers to create substantive and sustained ties with their audience (KatGunn refers to her followers as the "Gunn Club") that not only circulates shared sentiments, but ultimately encourages donations. This personal moment between KatGunn and her followers is awkwardly interrupted by the upbeat musical alerts that play as two new people subscribe to her channel leading KatGunn, holding a tissue to her face, to stop and thank the subscribers before continuing her discussion of her deceased friend. The heightened emotional capacity of this moment does not eclipse the fact that streamers do their work in order to make money, and

personal engagement with their followers encourages more subscriptions, in addition to investments in other fantasies beyond the perception of intimacy.

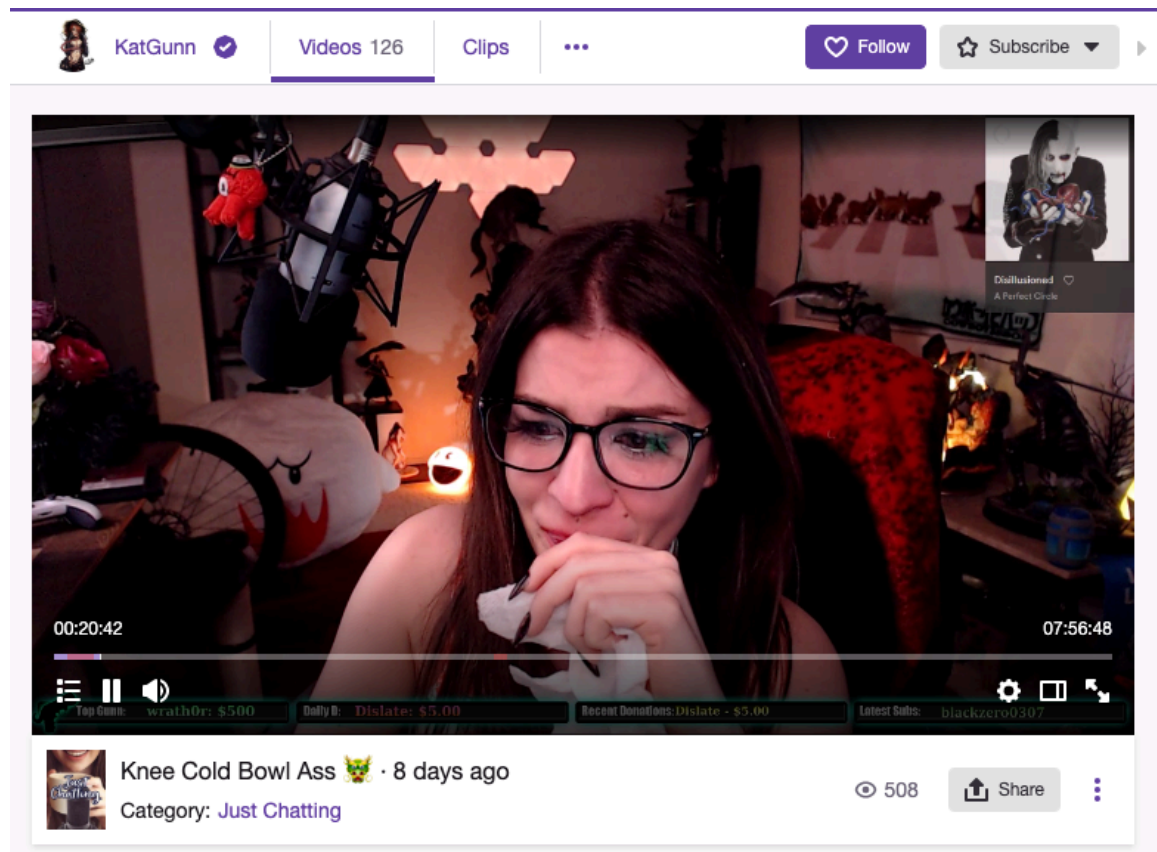


Figure 36. KatGunn

In addition to fostering intimacy, micro affective publics orient Twitch users toward the good life through investment in ideological fantasies embodied in happy objects, or ideals and products that correlate to authenticity, while affording streamers the capacity to monetize their channel. Typically associated with “anything that we imagine might lead us to happiness, including objects in the sense of values, practice, styles, as

well as aspirations” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29), happy objects include the ideological markers of authenticity intrinsic to Twitch such as adherence to geek, or aggressive, masculinity, a sexually available femininity, and presumptive whiteness or exoticized performance of racial Otherness. The emojis and emotes that are often personalized by individual streamers and available only to top-tier subscribers also function as material happy objects through their demarcation of allegiance to the exclusive micro public and familiarity with that micro public’s norms; these characters used in the chat act as standards for authenticity as they circulate in affective waves and are often used against supposed interlopers in chat-based attacks. Along with attachment to emotes and identity markers, the construction of streamers as celebrities and their performance of labor through leisure (gaming) affirm the affective public and orient audience members toward the fantasy of the good life – if they watch streamer gameplay to learn tips and tricks, and similarly invest their time in gaming and building a stream following, they too may stand to profit from what was once simply a pleasurable activity rather than an innovative site of micro entrepreneurialism.

More literal happy objects such as emojis and emotes, often representative of inside jokes, are a crucial way for streamers to monetize their channels and encourage chat participants to become subscribers, as subscription at various tiers allows them access to channel-specific emotes, which become means for further entrenching the micro affective public and orienting users toward authenticity. These emotes operate as a form of coded language that allows users to communicate in ways that only other regular audience members will understand, and, in the case of channel-specific emotes, in ways

that only other subscribers will even be able to see. These emotes, much like emojis and hashtags, “may be understood as fostering tropes of belonging that evolve beyond the conventional mode of rational thought” (Papacharissi, p. 117) and rather operate as affective shortcuts of intelligibility, allowing chat participants to grasp meaning at a glance, particularly during streams with high volumes of chat contributions that can be difficult to keep up with. In such crowded streams, these emotes can become a near-exclusive means of communication, creating a concise shorthand of affective affirmation or dissent among users that can demonstrate a crowd mentality, and sidestep the guidelines of moderators or bots. The crowd mentality and usage of emotes will be explored in a later section regarding racialized spamming and trolling, but it is worth reiterating here that streamer-personalized and Twitch-specific emotes are ubiquitous within the platform and behind a paywall; seeing the emotes’ consistent usage, or knowing that you are unable to see what everyone else is sharing, creates an immediate, affective demand within the audience for inclusion and accessibility, as the spaces of Twitch are largely defined by the balance of inclusion and exclusion, a cornerstone of geek masculinity. These literal happy objects are a clear demarcation to other users that particular chat participants are authentic gamers, as they are willing to pay for access and demonstrate their commitment to the micro affective public.

In addition to in-chat functions that cohere the affective public and allow streamers to monetize their channel, streamers use leaderboards, alerts, verbal thanking and their physical spaces as means to build their audience and subscriber count, as well as create friendly competition between members of their micro affective public. Consistent

gratitude for donations and new subscribers is a cornerstone of many channels, and more specifically for all female streamers in the sample; few male streamers stopped their “Just Chatting” sessions to thank subscribers. Streamers have the option of turning off their notifications, but typically an audible and visible alert that is individualized by the streamer plays whenever a viewer makes a straightforward donation or becomes a monthly subscriber. The (usually female) streamer typically then either interrupts their monologue to thank the donor, or waits until they have finished their thought to thank a series of donors at once. The unexpected sounds and visual, along with the direct acknowledgement from the streamer, produce an immediate affective reward for the donor, and draws attention from the entire audience toward that one individual, demonstrating what they too can experience if they choose to donate. There is an inherent affective appeal to this process, where both the donor and streamer are rewarded, and the audience enticed into entering this affective and economic exchange as well. As with most other elements of their channels, there are gendered differences in acknowledging donations, with women more likely to perform their gratitude than men. All of the women observed would thank every donor or subscriber, with many keeping a visual leaderboard of donors on their screen. Most of the men, conversely, either ignored these interruptions or turned their notifications off completely. This stark difference in how streamers handled the optional donations and subscriptions from their viewers reflects their reinforcement of gender performativity; women, who are socialized to be demure and passive, performed their gratitude consistently, while men, who largely treated their audience as though it were privileged to observe their expertise, performed their

dominance over the audience and “the unspoken and often unrecognized advantages of white masculinity in social interaction” (Sobieraj, 2017, p. 9) through their refusal to show gratitude. The notable exception to this trend is TimTheTatman, who would completely stop his story or conversation to repeatedly thank individuals, which is consistent with his alternative masculinity and his commitment to developing community ties within the channel, a departure I will explore more in a following section regarding adherence to gender norms.

Streamers also integrate their visible physical space as a means of monetization and fostering intimacy with their audience, as viewers are able to feel connected to streamers by viewing, judging and commenting on a streamer’s surroundings, or even seeing their own fan contributions in the space. As streamers typically stream from their homes, the visible space surrounding them is a deeply personal element of the stream, which many streamers and their audiences give close attention to; some streamers ensure their space is presentable and intentionally arranged, while others position the camera so that their space is minimally visible, while the 31st most watched streamer Lirik never shows his face or surroundings during streams, choosing only to let his audience hear a modified version of his voice. Audience members also regularly remark on what they see onscreen, whether they are making fun of Asmongold for having a literal pile of snacks and wrappers next to him, or commenting on a “sick” mug or new microphone the streamer is using, opening their spaces to opportunities for monetization and connectivity. Kaceytron displays all of the items that fans send to her, while Forsen displays images of emotes that have become popular in his channel on a wall behind him,

and other streamers more clearly monetize their space; STPeach maintains a physical subscriber and “VIP” board behind her, with each audience member’s name handwritten on a cutout peach on a tree, while TimTheTatman has a visible Monster Energy logo and mini fridge behind him, and KatGunn uses her visible space to advertise partnerships and gaming paraphernalia she has collected. For these streamers, their physical space or background functions as a form of passive advertising, ensuring that all elements of their stream – both visual and audio – are monetized and stimulating for the audience.

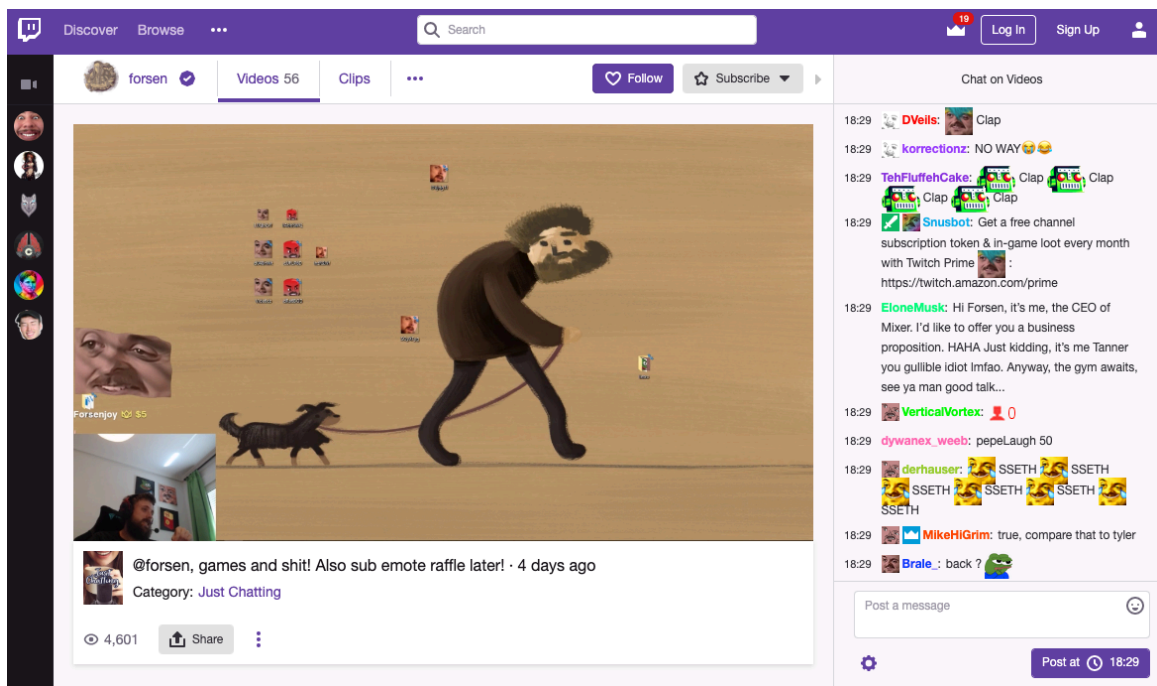


Figure 37. Forsen

Streamers capitalize on both passive and active forms of audience observation of and familiarity with their lives by monetizing their space through paid sponsorships and serving as brand ambassadors, as well as unpaid forms of aspirational labor, marking a continued means for streamers to savvily employ their full selves and spaces as sites of labor and utilize their micro affective public for economic gain. In observations of Shroud, he spent a significant amount of his “Just Chatting” time talking with his housemate, a woman who was not visible to the audience but could be heard through his computer, as they were communicating from different streams and rooms in the house about what they should eat, and whether to order out or not. It became apparent that this was a typical exchange of theirs, so much so that a chatbot consistently advertised Shroud’s personal Postmates coupon code, a fitting partnership given his penchant for food delivery, and his audience’s familiarity with this habit. KatGunn’s physical space surrounding her is clearly curated for audience viewing, with an array of gaming-related knick-knacks, which allows her to showcase her digital training bike, and seamlessly integrate it into conversation, much as she would an audience comment about her clothing or gameplay. In one instance, a chat participant asked her why there was a bike tire visible behind her, and she began discussing how she uses it as a “trainer” when it is hooked up to her computer. She then moved the camera view to clearly show the bike, and casually mentioned that she is working with the bike’s production company to promote “healthy e-sports” (KatGunn, 2019a). This exchange allowed KatGunn to easily transition between casual conversation with viewers and her role as a brand ambassador, all while remaining within her personal brand identity as a health-conscious streamer (she

typically streams with a heart monitor attached and allows users to see her heart rate throughout play). This type of product placement or embedded marketing functions particularly well on Twitch due to its live element, which allows for conversations regarding brands and products to occur semi-naturally – rather than as a scripted or staged element of television or film – and alongside the preexisting sense of trust and intimacy between streamer and viewer, which is decidedly not present in traditional media forms either. Such intimate forms of exchange and easy transition to conversations about sponsored content and products would not be possible without the intimacy of the micro affective public that distinctly depends on audience familiarity with, and comfort in questioning, a streamer’s space and personal life.

While streamers such as KatGunn and Shroud are compensated for their work with various brands, many other streamers engage in aspirational labor, or creative work which is performed using specific products in the hope that they will eventually become a paid brand ambassador (Duffy, 2015). Much as I have detailed throughout this section, Duffy outlines that “the project of the aspirational laborer involves building affective relationships with members of one’s community... As emotional laborers for the social media age, aspirants recognize the instrumental value of their affective relations as they try to increase their followers and likes; improve rankings; and rethink approaches to content based upon feedback” (p. 9). Indeed, streamers work to develop their digital following and increase the cohesiveness of their community and brand as ways to solidify their standing in Twitch rankings, build their subscriber counts, and to eventually land sponsorship deals; many of the streamers advertise the equipment they use for free,

consuming the goods they hope to one day be paid to use, by demonstrating their capacity as a viable sponsorship partner. Much like streaming in general, the integration of specific products functions aspirationally as there is no guarantee that any streamer will be paid for their labor by individual audience members or brands; the streamer relies on affective relationship building and community ties to present themselves as worthy of such investment. Each of these elements – the inclusion of channel-specific emotes, thanking donors and subscribers, maintaining leaderboards, and engaging (paid) advertising of popular gaming-related brands – mark the myriad ways that streamers monetize their streams and act as inventive microentrepreneurs in addition to gaming as leisure, all of which is accomplished through the development of and engagement with their micro affective publics. These various strategies cohere the affective public through forms of intimacy as well as user demonstrations of authenticity, or realness, in their dedication to particular streamers as both (highly skilled) gamers – an emergent form of unevenly compensated and recognized labor – and (micro) celebrities.

The emphasis on relationship building within streams, and historical association of gaming with leisure can easily obfuscate the fact that streaming – as well as audience participation – are forms of labor, and a sole form of income-generating labor for many streamers who have enough followers and streaming hours to become Twitch Partners, and microcelebrities in their own right. Most full-time streamers have a set schedule for streaming, but which tends to eclipse the typical 40-hour work week of most full-time employment, particularly given their additional labor in adding content to social media

platforms.²⁹ Audience members, by spectating and participating in the chat, are likewise performing valuable labor as they contribute to the streamer's overall ranking numbers, which impact their Partner status and algorithmic searchability, and create content through their chat and donation contributions. Audience members contribute to the shift from "passive spectatorship" to "active production" and the collapse of labor and leisure (Beller, p. 94), or the rise of prosumerism, in which otherwise consumers become active participants in the creation of income-generating content for a third party. Of course, this collapse of labor and leisure is also occurring for the streamer, who generally arrives at streaming through their personal history with gaming as a form of entertainment rather than pursuit of livelihood. The value-producing labor of both streamers and audience members, including audience expectations of consistent streaming and availability across a multitude of platforms as well as a desire to command the streamer's attention, highlight the ways that streamers are treated as much like celebrities as laborers or gamers.

Streamers attempt to maintain audience attention within the stream through many of the multisensory means explored above (sounds, music, alerts, chat, etc.), while simultaneously competing for audience attention and viewership against other channels, and are thus encouraged to engage in varying means for maintaining loyalty to their micro affective public, which all constitute forms of aspirational labor – or labor

²⁹ An American worker is considered full-time if they work at least 130 hours in a month, with a 40-hour work week equaling approximately 160 hours. Over a period of one month, female streamers included in the sample streamed an average of 154 hours, while male streamers had an average of 174.75 hours live (TwitchMetrics, n.d.). These numbers may be unusually low for streamers as well, as data collection covered the period of the Fortnite World Cup, an event that prevented most Twitch Partners from streaming as consistently as they typically would.

performed with the hope of future payment or payoff (Duffy, 2015). Not unlike a typical workweek, many streamers, and particularly Twitch Partners, have consistent streaming schedules, yet rather than a supervisor or employer setting this standard, streamers devise their own schedule and are immensely pressured by viewers and their subscription numbers to stream as much as possible and demonstrate their availability for audience members. For many streamers, this can create a form of bleed, or lack of distinction between work and personal life, particularly as gaming is no longer associated purely with entertainment for these streamers who near exclusively stream from their homes. TimTheTatman notes that while he was away from streaming for five days at a gaming event, he lost a significant number of paid subscribers: “I lose about a thousand subs every day that I don’t stream... I was at 24 [thousand]. I’m going to ballpark 19k [now]” (TimTheTatman, 2019b). Former top streamer Ninja similarly noted that when he took a two-day break from streaming in 2018, he lost approximately 40,000 subscribers (Grayson, 2018b). Deviation from a streamer’s anticipated schedule is immediately punished by viewers, who also expect streamers to be available throughout the day and night – well beyond a typical 40-hour work week. In this way, streamers are treated less like people, or workers, and more like digital content; it is their duty to be presenting and acting as original content whenever someone happens to visit their channel. Indeed, streaming is by and large not framed as work by users of the platform, or Twitch itself, amplifying the sentiment that streamers are present for viewer pleasure and should not be privy to workplace protections or expectations. Streamers are pressured by the imperative

to be productive – in line with post-Fordist labor expectations – while their experience as work, as productive even, is obscured by the fact that the site revolves around gameplay.

The framing of streaming as an extension of leisure, despite myriad evidence that it constitutes valuable income-generating labor for many streamers and their sponsors, releases Twitch from any responsibility to streamers as potential employees, and viewers from the responsibility to treat streamers as professionals who deserve to be paid a wage for their work – rather than donations – and treated respectfully. TimTheTatman is the only streamer observed who spoke about streaming explicitly as work, and that he has some expectation of a typical work environment. In one instance, TimTheTatman begins his streams by noting: “It’s gonna be a shorter stream today, chat. I’m tellin’ ya right now. I, uh, I have been awake since 5 in the morning. That’s Brew’s [his son Brewer] fault – he wasn’t sleeping well. But I’m sick on top of it. Like, that’s why it’s shorter today. I’m sick, bro” (TimTheTatman, 2019a). The chat responds by joking that he is allowed to take a sick day, that luckily he doesn’t have a job, and either making recommendations for how to care for himself or berating him:

7:30 Wipz: You sound sick as shit LOL

7:46 SrVerde32: just get better

7:52 amgonzo: Good morning feel better dad

8:11 WhoAreYouMySponsor: Gotta take care of yourself

8:15 AceTrainerMiles: Drink some Emergen-C

8:22 nick_2_saucyy: CRY ABOUT IT FATTY

8:34 germandan22: Luckily you don’t have to work

8:46 PMgoodnight: We'll grant you 8 hours of sick time so
get off stream
8:54 bronix32: Go get some rest bro, your chat understands
9:11 gan1469: Cry about it fatty
9:15 papa1bless8: Get better @timthetatman
9:20 nullidea: @TimTheTatman Cry about it more fatty
LULW
9:55 gdashman: ask your boss for the day off 4head
(TimTheTatman, 2019a).

These viewer comments simultaneously acknowledge, however insincerely, that this is both a form of labor (if not employment) for TimTheTatman and a space without any workplace protections, leaving him in the lamentable position of either having to work while sick and endure the berating of his viewers, or take time away to recover and lose valuable subscribers and their funds. While most of the selected and complete list of comments in this exchange were positive or politely joking, some were more negative or hostile in tone, which TimTheTatman immediately called out, as he is wont to do. After telling the chat he is sick, he then reads a comment aloud and responds: “‘Cry about it fatty’. Wow, I’m just trying to express how I feel, Nicholas. Nick, imagine if you go to work and you’re like, ‘hey guys, I’m not feeling too well’ ya know? Ya know? And then I walk up to you and I say, ‘Cry about it, fatty.’ Right? How’d you feel, Nick? Do unto others, Nicholas. Alright, thank you” (TimTheTatman, 2019a). In this instance, TimTheTatman explicitly draws attention to the stream as his workplace and notes the differential treatment of this space as opposed to more traditional sites of labor before

chastising the viewer for engaging in this negative behavior – and when the streamer is clearly ill. The treatment of TimTheTatman by his viewers provides a stark example of the internalization of post-Fordist and neoliberal ideologies; individuals are expected to act as entrepreneurs of the self, depending on their embodied capacity for labor and affective engagement without any workplace entitlements for when they are sick or have other mitigating circumstances that prevent them from performing constant labor. This lack of protection, paired with the extension of the workweek well beyond 40 hours, and the deployment of streamers' full capacities in monetizing their streams reflect not only post-Fordist labor shifts, but streamers' pursuit of the good life as they foster micro affective publics that cohere around demonstrations of 'authenticity' vis-à-vis an endless dedication to all things gaming and the exclusionary tactics of emotes, leaderboards, and inside jokes.

Yet while streamers may not be broadly understood as workers despite their obvious labor in training for gaming and building affective ties within their channel, they are treated like celebrities as they host meet and greets with fans at events, have followers and subscribers in the thousands and millions, and these followers can become deeply invested in the professional and personal lives of streamers through not only their streams, but their presence on a multitude of social media platforms. More than most celebrities, even in an era of social media saturation, these gamer microcelebrities are selling the unique product of constant access to and interaction with them through live chat and video. Unlike reality television or social media, the streamers' personal lives often become part of the stream in a way that audience members can engage with them

about such developments in real-time and become an active part of the gossip or controversy, bringing them into closer proximity to the imagined authenticity of streamers and their ‘realness’. Just during the period of my observation, numerous controversies unfolded across the platform – such as Ninja’s unexpected departure from Twitch to sign an exclusive contract with Microsoft Mixer, the demonization of Alinity for throwing her cat during a stream, the dissolution of Pink_Sparkle’s “streamer house”, Belle Delphine’s attempt to sell her own bath water, and HeatheredEffect’s live streaming of her breastfeeding in order to normalize the act – with chat participants of each stream regularly asking the streamer how they felt about what was unfolding in other channels or social media platforms. As an example of the imbrication of streamers’ personal lives in the fabric of the affective public of Twitch, Pink_Sparkles, the 129th most followed streamer with 783,651 followers, became embroiled in a controversy regarding her living arrangement after she moved to Texas to be with her boyfriend Zach, or Asmongold, the 14th most watched streamer on Twitch.³⁰ Pink_Sparkles begins a stream by stating that she is “so nervous about streaming because I never stream anymore, this is like so strange for me to do” (Pink_Sparkles, 2019). Forty-five minutes into her stream (after greeting each chat participant and chatting with Asmongold who is streaming across the room), it becomes clear that she is attempting to explain and defend herself against recent accusations hurled across Twitch and social media platforms from other popular streamers regarding their collective plans to lease a house together and become a “streamer house,” where all parties stream their lives constantly. As an

³⁰ The accuracy of these statistics reflects the time of data collection.

uninitiated observer, it was difficult to understand why Pink_Sparkles was so adamantly defending herself, at one point noting that she was breaking out in hives, but that she needed to get through her statement. It was only after I researched this controversy that I found Pink_Sparkles had been the center of blame for the groups' housing issues, an incident that had produced countless hours of content for each of the streamers involved. The lack of context provided by Pink_Sparkles, paired with the chat participants' existing knowledge of the situation demonstrates how Twitch is an immersive platform where viewers are able to participate in drama and controversy in real-time, while streamers can both become embroiled in controversy *and* defend themselves vis-à-vis the platform – all while feeding into the dramatics and drawing an increased viewership. In this case, Pink_Sparkles had not streamed “in so long,” but now had a clear reason to specifically because of this dispute with her former housemates and fellow streamers.

The constant inundation of new controversies and gossip as well as the unrivaled access to streamers' lives mark the significance of celebrity to the affective public of Twitch – beyond the investment of viewers in the industry and sport of gaming, and, when paired with the monetization of streamers' channels become emblematic of the various forms of labor that streamers engage as microentrepreneurs. As streamers engage these practices individually, they fall in line with post-Fordist forms of precarious and individualized labor that frame laborer's (if they are seen as laborers) experience as unique rather than part of a milieu of labor shifts, and individuals as personally responsible for their socioeconomic position, despite fact that each micro affective public, or stream, contributes to not only the affective public of Twitch, but the broader

breakdown of stable employment and deployment of workers' full capacities in crafting their own piecemeal forms of income and pursuit of doing what they love. Streamers' and audience members' participation in each micro affective public and their fortification through the circulation of sentiments and literal as well as figurative happy objects align these users with the idealization of authenticity, or 'realness,' as seen through the balance of inclusionary and exclusionary practices.

Streamers face manifold pressures to demonstrate their authenticity as gamers and as in line with traditional gender and racial norms, lest they be attacked for failing to conform and convey their 'realness' to audiences. Yet as streamers perform their authenticity (or fail to), it is clear that this is not a self-evident identity, but rather is produced as a mode of self-representation that aligns with neoliberal ideologies and user expectations within the affective public. While all users face some degree of pressure to conform, this becomes more imperative for streamers who are public figures and seeking donations from viewers; audience members can be completely anonymous in this process (never participate in the chat), be known to the group by their chosen and consistent screenname, or, also be known as another streamer, an option inherently unavailable to streamers who are typically visible and audible on their stream as well as accessible through other social media platforms. The inequity of this visibility creates a dialectical imbalance of power in which the streamer is allowed a voice and primary control over the stream, but they also face the burden of overexposure and potential harassment, doxing, or other forms of abuse from viewers because of their heightened visibility and the

viewers' anonymity, which can be disadvantageous for those who fail to conform, or be properly authentic.

Perhaps the key marker of authenticity within Twitch is the ability to perform high level gaming, a seemingly objective and tangible demarcation of one's commitment to the activity and demonstration that one is present on Twitch for the 'right' reasons. Yet the specific parameters of this identification have deepened gender divides within the gaming community and Twitch, with claims consistently circulating that women are not 'real' gamers, and thus do not belong on Twitch. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, gaming is notoriously associated with toxic masculinity and a predominantly male base, both in terms of production and consumption – a division which has been defended with the unjustified claims that “women simply do not like games” (Jean, 2019) or that women are not “true” or “hard-core” gamers “because they play more casually and less skillfully” than men (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, p. 421). Despite such persistent stereotyping and a glaring dearth of women in the development and production side of the gaming industry, women now account for approximately 40% of all video game players (Hills, 2018), but they remain largely invisible in their overall participation in the industry as they are consistently marginalized, and account for only 15.6% of all users of Twitch as of 2017 (Yosilewitz, 2018). Masculinity, and more specifically gamer masculinity, is ubiquitous to the site, making it invisible and only that which departs becomes visible and worth noting. There has been consistent and recent controversy within the Twitch community regarding the role of women, and whether women are/can be serious gamers while also “flaunting,” or simply possessing, feminine characteristics

such as breasts or wearing makeup. As an example, the perceived prevalence of women “using” their bodies and gender to garner followers and money led to pushback from male streamers in 2017, including the high profile streamer Trainwreck, who was suspended for five days from Twitch after his vlog referring to female Twitch streamers as “the goddamn same sluts that choose the goddamn fucking cool kids over us” went viral (Ismail, 2017). Male critics claim that such women “sit pretty and solicit compliments from fans or insults from trolls in exchange for subscription money” (D’Anastasio, 2018a). This type of language suggests that Twitch is a space for men, and particularly for men who embody geek masculinity, and who presumably are more ‘authentic’ in their gameplay and self-presentation on Twitch. Women are thus more susceptible to receiving controlling and derogatory comments and sexual harassment as they are imagined to be inauthentic gamers, while similar comments directed toward male streamers are often ironic or meant to draw attention to their own departure from norms of masculinity. During my observation period, comments made toward male streamers in the chat tended to focus on game play, while comments toward women tended to objectify them and focus more on the streamer’s body than anything else, reflecting similar research (Nakandala, et al., p. 165).³¹

The typical performance of geek masculinity and audience response to demonstrations of authenticity vis-à-vis gender and gameplay are embodied in Shroud, a cisgender man who was the second most followed streamer and seventh most watched

³¹ I only observed streamers who presented as cisgender men and women, marking a limitation of these observations.

overall at the time of observation. Audience members typically tune in to watch him play various games and use the “Just Chatting” segment to suggest various games for him to play, seemingly aware that he does not readily answer questions either about his personal life or engage much at all directly with his chat. Indeed, rather than participate in a conversation, Shroud’s interactions tended to consist of him talking *at* his chat, or his chat watching as he talked with other online players. At the open of his streams, Shroud would not typically greet his chat or viewers, and only sparingly read his chat at all, conveying that he is more concerned with game play than building an affective public, and reinforcing his position of distanced celebrity. When he did respond to viewer comments or questions, it would often be in an aggressive and condescending manner, reinforcing his dominance over the stream and positioning as possessing superior knowledge. In one such example, a user consistently asked that he play “PUBG,” or PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds, a popular game. Shroud responded by stating, “Play PUBG, damnit’. You know what? If you want me to play that buggy fucking mess, fine, fine. I will check out this buggy fucking build. Checkin’ this buggy build. You want me to see how bad PUBG is right now? I am down. You know what, I’m actually down. I’m curious myself” (Shroud, 2019a). Shroud immediately discredits and belittles the viewer by suggesting that the game they would like to see played is “buggy,” or lacking in quality, before shifting to restating the request as stemming from his own curiosity. Rather than interacting with the chat and viewers as co-contributors in the affective micro public, Shroud – like many male streamers – reasserts his domination of the stream and gameplay more broadly. Yet he is not admonished or challenged by the chat participants,

as his show of force reaffirms his geek masculinity and authenticity as a ‘real’ gamer and thus belonging on the platform.

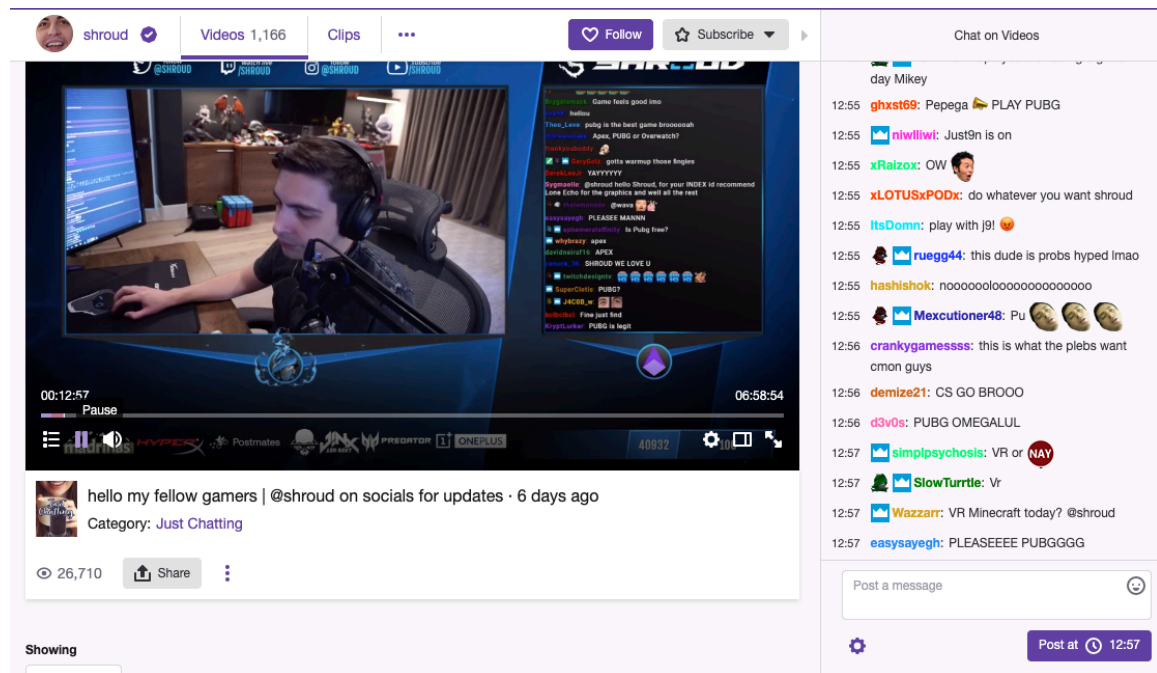


Figure 40. Shroud

The female streamer KatGunn is also affirmed as authentic vis-à-vis her high level of gameplay, despite her feminine gender presentation, marking that the category is available to women in limited circumstances, and generally also only if they fit preconceived ideas of feminine sexual attractiveness. Unlike most female streamers, KatGunn did not receive many – if any – gender-based sexual or harassing comments during the observation period, which speaks to how her establishment of a micro affective public is premised less on her gender presentation or sexual availability than her

expertise in the field of gameplay. During one stream, chat participants noted that she was wearing a new dress and complimented her, and while she did respond to these comments, the exchange reflected communication between friends or colleagues rather than the sexualization of KatGunn, and the conversation quickly shifted to her gameplay, with viewers helping her to remember at what level she beat a particular game, and against whom she was playing. Not unlike Shroud, KatGunn then spoke at length about her favorite games to play, and how well she plays them, with the addition of describing her “e-penis” and getting to show ‘how big her e-penis is’ when she beats people at various games (KatGunn, 2019a). The differentiation in KatGunn’s affective micro public from other women may be in part due to her establishment of the “Gunn Club” – a term of endearment for her viewers, which fosters a sense of intimacy and trust between parties as chat participants mocked the few comments about her appearance, as well as her self-presentation as a cocky gamer. While KatGunn is able to embody authenticity through her identification as a high-level gamer, most observed women (and female Twitch Partners generally) are not afforded this same possibility, or at least not without concomitant gender-based comments and attacks.

The affective public of Twitch, and each micro affective public, also situates individuals as authentic through their adherence to traditional gender norms, as men engage geek and toxic masculinity, while women, conversely, must balance a perpetuation of fantasies of sexual availability with their capacity as gamers. The framing of Twitch as a space for men who are not “cool” but excel in gaming places women in a paradoxical position where they are only able to procure subscribers and donations

through desirability, their ability to affirm masculinity (Braithwaite, p. 5) through flirtatious overtures, and their willingness to endure harassment – all while claiming rights to the gamer identity. During the observation period, and in line with Western gender norms, self-identified female streamers generally appeared to put more energy into their physical appearance (wearing makeup, styled hair and thoughtful outfits) and draw the viewers' attention to their bodies – pointing out changes in their bodies as they exercised more or tanned, with the audience noting other changes to their appearance such as eyebrows, nails or hair color, in addition to being more passive and conversational and sharing more about their personal lives. Female streamers' self-presentations were generally in line with hegemonic Western gender norms, in which presumably heterosexual cisgender women are socialized to be approval seeking, well-groomed and hyper-aware of their bodies.

Streamers' alignment with these norms marks them as authentically feminine and fulfilling male fantasies, though such attention to their physicality and affectation must be balanced with a dedication to gaming as well, marking the extension of women's labor beyond that of their male peers. At the same time, women's individual attention to their viewers and willingness to share information about their personal lives builds a sense of intimacy, or affective engagement, within the micro affective public, expanding their income-generating capacities. As an example, the 21-year-old streamer BrookeAB who is the 112th most watched overall, begins one stream lip syncing to her background music while the audience views her perfectly curled and dyed hair, along with her carefully applied 'natural look' makeup. She greets the chat by stating, "Look at my lashes!" and

leans toward the camera, inviting chat members to comment on her new fake eyelashes, which they proceed to do for the next several minutes (BrookeAB, 2019a). This is not unlike Pokimane inviting viewers to examine the tan lines on her stomach, or Pink_Sparkles pointing out her new shorts which are barely visible beneath her expansive cleavage. In each of these instances, female streamers draw viewer attention, and presumably the sexualized attention of male viewers to their bodies for inspection and approval, as they implicitly accept that their embodied presentation is a key element of their streams and ability to generate revenue. Male streamers rarely, if ever, draw attention to their bodies or physical presentation, with the notoriously disheveled streamer Asmongold as a prime example of this disparity. In one stream, as Pink_Sparkles speaks to the camera, Asmongold lays down behind her on a futon, wraps himself in a comforter, and begins to eat ice cream from a paper bowl. The physical presentation of these two streamers is stark, with Pink_Sparkles illuminated by a bluish glow and a camera angle that highlights her cleavage and enhanced facial features, while Asmongold relaxes in dirty clothes and bedding, with his hair unbrushed, talking through his bites of ice cream. While Asmongold's presence in her stream would seemingly detract from the fantasy of Pink_Sparkles' sexual availability, the coupling in fact reinforces the general fantasy of an attractive woman with cartoonishly large breasts who exudes sexuality being attracted to the disheveled and conventionally unattractive male. This particular moment along with the consistent presentation of all observed streamers highlight the significantly disparate ways that female and male streamers present

themselves as gendered and, importantly, in line with hegemonic gendered expectations that allow their micro affective public to be read as normative and thus authentic.

While the majority of female Twitch Partners affirm hegemonic gender norms and roles, balancing their identification as gamers with their sexual availability, the streamer kaceytron's channel is defined by her satirical persona and baiting of negative comments from her devoted followers, which is specifically meant to draw attention to the overarching sexism and conflicting pressures placed on women within Twitch. Kaceytron draws both praise and ire for her persona and hijinks, making it impossible to determine if viewers are engaging because they are hate-watching or because they are in on the joke with her. As an example, in one stream, kaceytron leaves her screen blank and unattended for nearly two minutes before greeting her chat visibly and stating, "I don't know, you guys, I feel like I should put on a tit shirt. Hold on... I feel like I should be showing more cleavage. You know, for my viewer count" (kaceytron, 2019). Kaceytron overtly draws attention to the gendered expectations of women on the platform, and satirically plays into perceived viewer demands that she show more of her body. She disappears from view for several minutes, while still reading and responding to chat comments, as she changes and fixes her makeup. When she returns, she asks her viewers "Does this look better?" (kaceytron, 2019) and the chat immediately responds with sexually suggestive and judgmental comments such as "good enough to turn me straight omg...", "hair looks greasy," and "my peen is getting hard". Kaceytron reads a comment aloud and responds, "'Hair looks greasy.' Oh shit, I've got some dry shampoo" (kaceytron, 2019). As opposed to other female streamers who tend to ignore sexualized

comments, kaceytron invites and engages with these critiques, playing into typically unspoken expectations that her presentation is for viewer pleasure rather than self-fulfillment or esteem. In this, and many other ways, kaceytron's channel stands out from other streamers' as she systematically illuminates the double standard for women on the platform through her carefully curated persona.

By insisting that she needs to give the audience 'what they want', kaceytron draws attention the performative aspect of Twitch streaming – they are in front of an audience after all – as well as women's invisible labor in typically preemptively fulfilling these demands. When kaceytron does her makeup offscreen but maintains the conversation with her chat, the audience is forced to not only wait for her return, but to experience the *time* it takes for women to complete these typically invisible and unspoken tasks. Kaceytron similarly draws attention to the absurdity of the expectation that Twitch streamers be experts in gaming in order to be authentic gamers, and thus of value or worthy of viewer investment. In one stream, kaceytron repeatedly killed her own character while proclaiming that she is a professional gamer and an expert, drawing vitriol from her viewers and prompting them to file complaints with Twitch, claiming that she had somehow violated the platform's Code of Conduct. Whether viewers are hate watching and participating in the circulation of negative affects, or joining in kaceytron's satirical play on the rigid standards set by Twitch and its users, her channel serves as a juxtaposition to how other women unironically perform their normative gender identity and the fantasy of sexual availability and manage themselves according to viewer demands. Kaceytron's performance lies bare the constructed nature of the supposed

authenticity and ‘realness’ of Twitch streamers, a fact which may work to draw much of her negative attention.

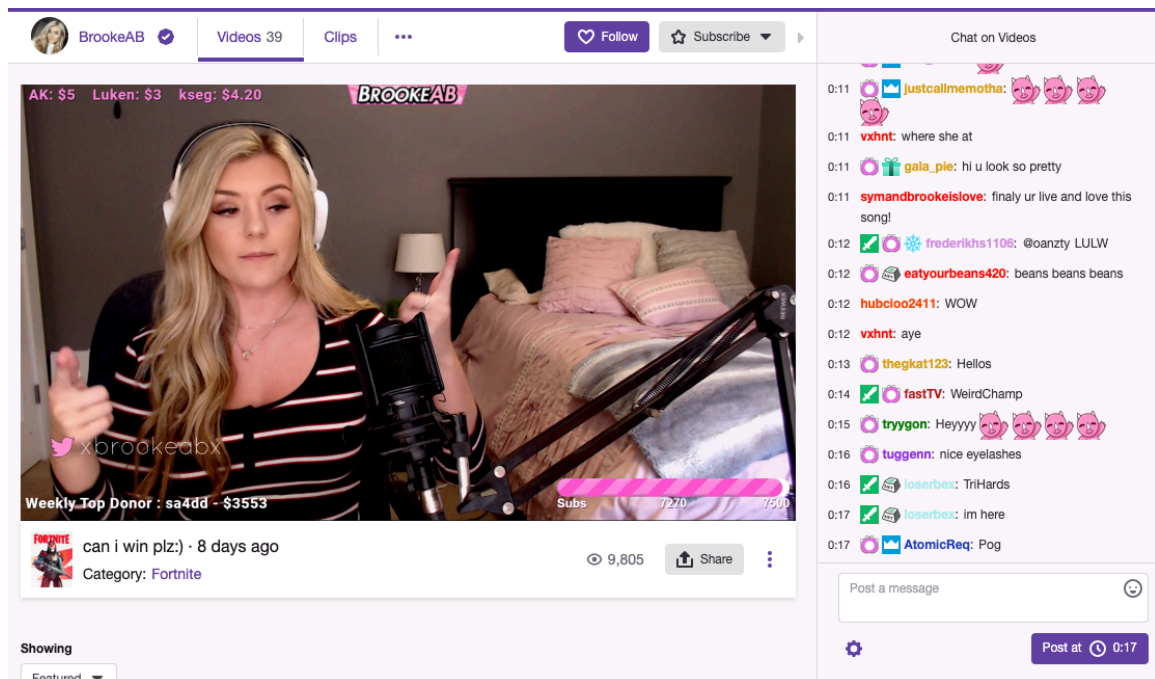


Figure 41. BrookeAB

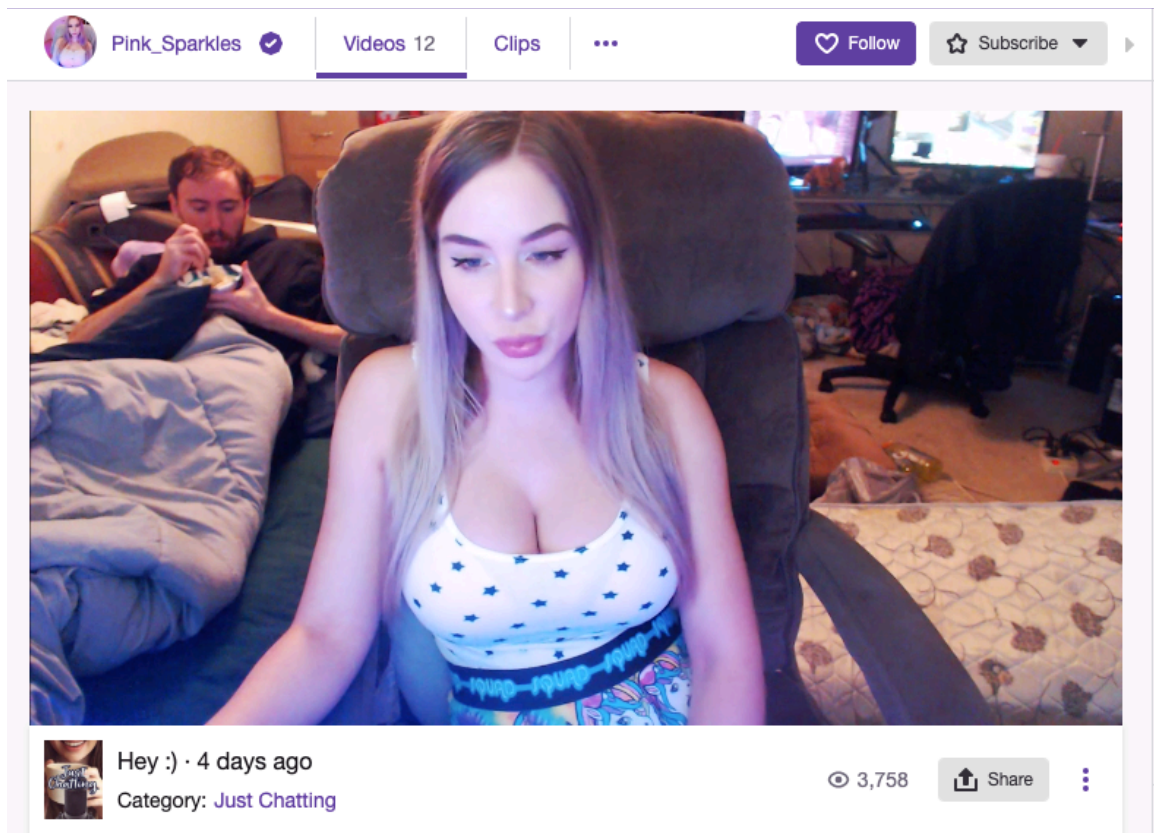


Figure 42. Pink_Sparkles and Asmongold

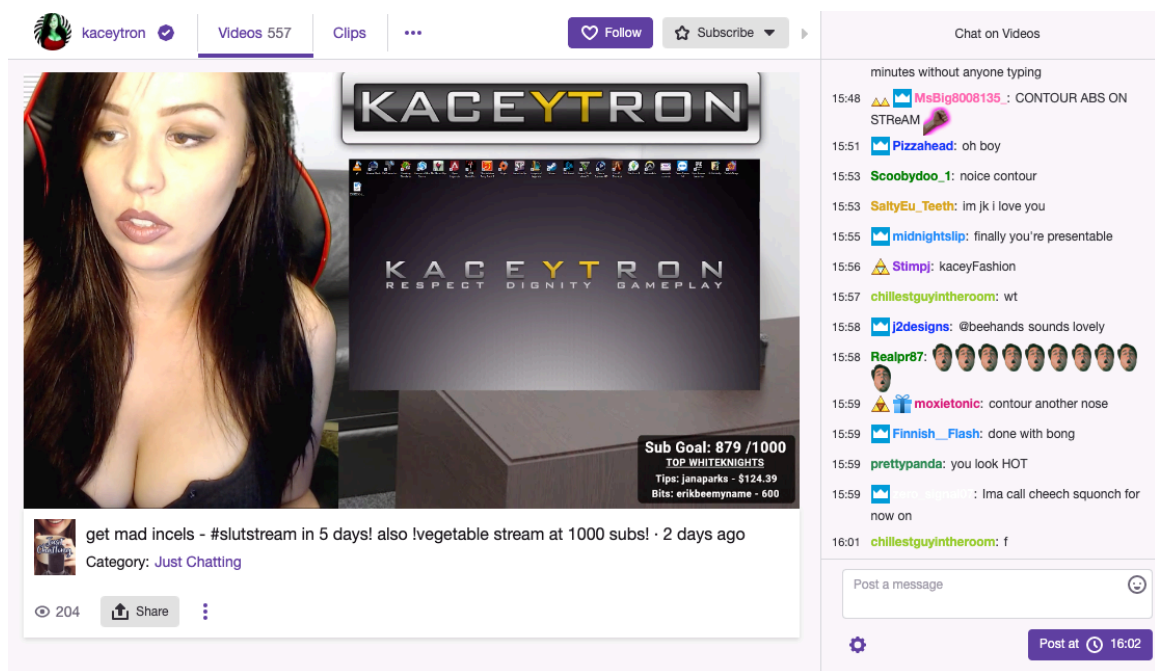


Figure 43. kaceytron

Unsurprisingly, most women were the frequent targets of catcalling, critiques and praise of their physical appearance, as well as demands that they (inter)act in certain ways, demonstrating chat participants' attempts to control women's behavior and engage them in a dynamic that places the power with the (male) audience rather than the female streamer, while also negating their authenticity and belonging on the platform. Catcalling comments were not unlike those typically experienced by women offline, such as: "can u put me on your to do list"; "are you a vergin?"; "Brooke is so hot. I think I'm gonna nut"; "You little slut I'd bust the gowl of you"; "im so hard rn"; and "you look so good whit that tshirt". Most, if not all, of these comments were completely ignored by the streamer, demonstrating the emotional labor involved in ignoring the often disturbing words and instead presenting an unaffected front to viewers. (Female) Streamers must quickly

become attuned and numb to the overwhelming frequency of negative comments, particularly in busier chats that are more difficult for the streamer and bots to police:

MystAndrew: Looked like she just got fucked in da booty hole

mel_tr: U ugly

jammmy: have you changed your hair again your hair looks different

sketchy_bob: what happened to ur face

juanchavez_321: you should do a stream without makeup (BrookeAB, 2019b).

x19oc: You look like a Pig

ravensbeast24: love ur makeup poki

jmgiroux: what's wrong with your eyebrows

jpgarcia1204: Spread your vagene lips

fieldjam: take off that shirt

yoboilikesyou: Your so boring and your room is so messy clean it up before streaming nobody wants to see your trash (Pokimane, 2019b; Pokimane, 2019a).

BadBoyKillaGaming: you are nicer with less foundation imho (STPeach, 2019b).

Most of the observed female streamers received a steady stream of comments similar to these, which position women as sexualized objects of desire and derision rather than gamers or professionals, who claim belonging to the platform. Such consistent comments and attacks attempt to intimidate, shame and discredit women as a way to silence them or “limit their impact in digital publics” (Sobieraj, 2017, p.5). The frequency of these

objectifying and demeaning comments often reflects the size of the stream viewership and chat participation; when audience members can reasonably expect anonymity and that the streamer won't directly respond to them, they seem more likely to make such derogatory comments, while they are less likely to when there is a higher likelihood that they will be policed by other members of the chat or the streamer herself. This points not only to the persistence of group cohesion, but also the awareness chat participants have of community expectations and the fine line between showboating and being shamed. These comments also serve the purpose of unifying the audience through the discursive logic of their shared negative sentiments, which – in their magnitude – create an affective resonance or feedback loop. In totality, these comments operate affectively not only for the chat members who reinforce their communal bond, but also for the streamer who must manage her affective responses as all of the female streamers observed had *no visible reaction whatsoever* to any of these odd and often disturbing comments. This lack of response on the part of the streamer shows how they have either become numb to such abhorrent comments, or they have performed emotional labor to control their embodied responses. In either case, female streamers develop embodied coping mechanisms for these expected taunts in order to continue streaming and earning an income. Female streamers face the difficult task of balancing competing performative roles, lest they be read as inauthentic and not belonging to the Twitch affective public; they must be high level gamers, available sexual objects, and bear the brunt of catcalling and sexual harassment that is meant to demean them and reinforce the dominance of male viewers. Maintaining the balance of these identities affords them the identification with

authenticity and a means to generate income as microentrepreneurs and pursue the good life through doing what they love, no matter how emotionally or affectively difficult it may be.

As the affective public of Twitch is geared toward a male audience and adherence to geek or toxic masculinity, male streamers must perform these roles, but with less risks of being read as inauthentic or not belonging if they fail to conform. Women are always already assumed to be intruders and must prove their worth, while Twitch and gaming are taken as the natural province of men. The gendered performance of men is certainly policed, with expectations that they fulfill hegemonic Western norms including aggression, arrogance and condescension regarding their game play. Male streamers also typically shared little about their personal lives, treating “Just Chatting” less as a space for the emotional labor of relationship building, and more as a point of privilege for viewers who have the opportunity to potentially interact with the streamer or watch their gameplay. While female streamers typically invested in their physical appearance and self-representation, male streamers often appeared more unkempt and did not necessarily dress for their audiences or draw attention to their bodies. While women generally fell in line with expectations that they be approval-seeking and well groomed, male streamers typically adhered to hegemonic socialization as dominant and authoritative – as evinced by the interactions between Shroud and his chat, with physicality a mere afterthought – seen with Asmongold’s reputation for being disheveled and surrounded by literal garbage.

While many male streamers, to some extent, performed the roles of geek or toxic masculinity, there were notable exceptions, including TimTheTatman, and sodapoppin (whose particular stream will be discussed below). As discussed above, TimTheTatman is the only streamer who discussed streaming as work, as his form of employment, and encouraged his streamers to understand the effect their words and taunts have, particularly when considered as part of workplace interactions rather than anonymous internet trolling. TimTheTatman's response to this instance, and many other problematic comments has earned him the reputation of "one of the nicest guys on the streaming platform" (Craven, 2019), marking the widespread recognition of his departure from the established norm of toxic masculinity on the platform. In another example, early in a stream, TimTheTatman states in response to a series of comments from one chat participant, "Hey 'play overwatch xqc' guy, right, I appreciate you, alright? I don't wanna play overwatch right now. Please don't yell at me, ok? So stop, ok? I just wanna ease into my day, just relax, ya know? I'm sure I'll play overwatch eventually, buddy, just not right now, ok? [Smiles] Yeah, just, ok? Everyone ok?" (TimTheTatman, 2019b). TimTheTatman's entire response here is spoken in a very calm, gentle voice, as though he is speaking to a child, or trying to calm someone who is agitated, and he ends the admonishment with a smile and laugh, showing his viewers that he is not upset, and that everyone is welcome to continue participating – without hostility. His chat immediately responds with "YELL AT HIM," "You rock bro," "chat yell at him pog," and "I love Tim so much" showing their respect and support for the streamer and his response to

disruptive commenters.³² TimTheTatman's micro affective public, as demonstrated in this instance and many others observed, maintained a less antagonistic tenor than other male streamers, focusing instead on building an inclusive affective public premised on mutual respect. This management of his public and establishment of a niche also allowed him to maintain his positioning an authentic gamer who rightfully belongs on Twitch, particularly as the chat had clearly developed a norm of trolling him for his physical appearance rather than his affectation or gaming abilities.

TimTheTatman, and other male streamers, received many derogatory comments about his appearance, a practice which – when targeted toward men – fosters group cohesion in the micro affective public more than signaling a potentially violent attack. As men are already dominant on Twitch, both in terms of numbers and gendered performance of authority, attacks against each other's physical appearance including mocking weight, lack of musculature or hair can easily be read as playful chiding rather than attempts to discredit and discourage their presence. Regardless of the (lack of) malintent behind the comments, their frequency and similarity coheres the affective public, amplifying their circulation and bringing chat participants closer together in their shared exclusive knowledge:

hausasd: @shrou U need hit the gym bro...

LightYearsAhead_no: lol, shroud getting double chin???

jimmy_swisher: dat ass doe

SniperDog: THICC butt

³² "Pog" is a Twitch-specific slang term broadly referring to someone who is clueless and does not contribute to the mission in gameplay.

valus_tv: THICC THICC THICC
derpyturt13: THICC THICC THICC
legendary333: not fat, THICC
priceaka14: Gym man
thelemonade: Shroud is a fatty

rinx_y_: YES he answerd me
vviipp: I subbed and shroud never noticed
AretasTv: good luck getting sub mentions here haha (Shroud, 2019a, 2019b).

Kagami_77: You look terrible @xQcOW
flamezy68: u need a trim
OreoThugTV: @XqcOW TAKE A SHOWER WTF..

ahugefridge: @xQcOW I WANT ATTENTION YOU GOBLIN (xQcOW, 2019).

darklionxxx: SHOW ASS
teddig: show ass @LIRIK
plaguedocument: pet cat plz (Lirik, 2019).

bangbangis: good morning to the thicccckkesssst streamer on twitch!!!!!!
therealfaza: Welcome back fatty
humbeltoenail: Tim the tat man can cum on my face anyday of the week
son

Frankepic_29: Sup fatty play games LULW
baweti8: Don't wanna be that guy but play some games fatty

ImBigRigs10: put your cam on fatty

BrianWGamez: hey tim. I've been subbed a yr last week. never noticed me once my dude

xpertjohn: WHY ARE YOU BALD PLEASE ANSWER (TimTheTatman, 2019a, 2019b).

These comments made toward male streamers are certainly less sexual in nature, with those targeting their physical attributes serving the dual purpose of drawing attention to men's divergence from hegemonic standards of masculinity and demonstrating group cohesion of chat members as they build on each other's comments or repeat them in waves. As seen above, chat participants began noting Shroud's "thicc" rear when he turned his back on the camera, with participants flooding the chat with this slang for minutes on end. This marked one of the only times that Shroud engaged the chat directly, as he made one comment asking the audience not to look at his backside, but is a typical example of how chat participants become enmeshed in a wave of sentiment that reflects an insular joke and fortifying of the affective public. Importantly, however, the totality of these comments toward men did not detract from male streamers' legitimacy as gamers, as control-seeking comments often encouraged them to begin gameplay rather than participate in "Just Chatting" – as opposed to comments toward women which attempted to control their bodies, movements, and physical space. The tenor of gendered comments overall attempted to delegitimize women's belonging in the space and their position as professional gamers and reinforce the legitimacy of male gamers as both professionals and the rightful inhabitants of Twitch as a digital public space. This reinforcement of

gender and subcultural norms was accomplished both through targeting the streamers themselves, but also as demonstrations for other chat participants and audience members; viewers own authenticity and legitimacy is affirmed through their participation in such gendered attacks.

Male streamers demonstrate their authenticity as gamers and entrepreneurs worthy of audience investment through adherence to gender norms as well as the policing of these norms, including gender presentation and sexuality. Gendered presentations are policed in some male streamers' channels typically through covert jokes and plays on insider knowledge. While the chat sometimes made ironic comments about Shroud being "thicc" or calling Shroud or TimTheTatman "daddy," this was distinct from those streamers who encouraged homophobia in their stream as a way to affirm male dominance on the platform and particular performances of masculinity as acceptable. Yet homophobic remarks and emotes are less overt and often only intelligible to dedicated members of a streamer's micro affective public as they have been layered over various emotes and jokes insular to Twitch. As an example, the 36th most watched streamer Forsen adapted from a series of memes and videos the Japanese term "gachi" which is a shortened version of "gachimuchi," referring to muscular (gay) men, and parlayed it into a series of personalized emotes such as "gachiGASM," "gachiBASS" and "gachiBASS" which are used to convey extreme pleasure in something, connoting a sexual or homosexual release (How2pc, 2019; Alexander, 2018). In context, this emote is typically used (across many channels) to express an ironic or otherwise facetious sexual interest in a male streamer when they get a haircut, wear a new outfit, or otherwise change their

appearance. To the unfamiliar, this emote may go completely unnoticed in a chat, marking its exclusivity and capacity to affirm the micro affective public as a space limited to the authentic and dedicated participants who are ‘in the know’. Additionally, many of these emotes are only visible to those who pay for subscriptions to a channel (non-subscribers will see their text titles rather than an image), marking another level of exclusivity and even monetization of homophobic and (later) racist tropes.

The example of the streamer sodapoppin (the 23rd most watched streamer overall) presents a complex and insular example of homophobia and how streamers’ micro affective publics possess layers of meaning and interaction that reify the strict parameters of authenticity vis-à-vis alignment with gender norms. Questions regarding his sexuality have plagued sodapoppin for years, as he does not align with expectations of a domineering and physically imposing self-representation. In response to these questions of his authenticity as a legitimate and masculine gamer, sodapoppin has appropriated the LGBTQ pride flag and capitalized on his gender presentation, which has been ridiculed as effeminate. During stream, sodapoppin presents himself as a gay character to simultaneously mock and leverage questions of his sexuality, while also denigrating the LGBTQ community and associated stereotypes. Toward the beginning of one stream, he states:

Well, I just wanna let everyone know, ok? This is really important. I’m wearing a cashmere sweater today. So, today I mean business. Max comfort. Max style. Max gayness. It’s fucking cashmere. Just letting you know who you’re talking to. Alright. Now that we’ve gotten that out of the

way we can continue with the stream. I'm comfortable as fuck! God it's so soft and so cashmere... Oh my god. I love it" (sodapoppin, 2019).

At the outset of his stream, sodapoppin makes a point to draw attention to his own appearance and ridicule it (in a deadpan voice) before others have an opportunity to demean him, but also to affirm and build on audience expectations of his homophobic persona. As sodapoppin speaks and rubs his arms across his sweater, the chat responds immediately with a flood of his personalized emotes titled "sodapride" and "sodagay". The titling of these emotes masks their homophobic intent and circumvents the Twitch Community Guidelines, while simultaneously building an insular frame of reference and affective wave of affirmation. While sodapoppin's performative persona as well as he and Forsen's monetization of homophobic emotes are meant to affirm (geek) masculinity and exclusivity of intelligibility, they also ironically draw attention to the extensive homosociality of the platform and the many ways that men draw attention to each other's bodies, personal lives, and gameplay while negotiating their own performances of masculinity. While women are able to negotiate their legitimacy only through enduring vitriolic attacks and further aligning themselves with gendered expectations – or expressly mocking them, men are afforded significantly more latitude in establishing their own narrative for their identity construction and building their micro affective public around their gendered presentation. At the same time, male streamers are able to monetize such negotiated identities, as viewers clamor to gain access to the purchasable emotes that convey group cohesion and demonstration of insular knowledge. It is worth noting that this discussion of masculinity is largely limited to the concomitant

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VR GAMES

Name & Link	Info	Preview	Release	Status	Last	Played	Extra Information
Crossblade: The Prison	A dark world, full of mysteries, and unforgiving events.	Link	VR -	8-Jun-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
RaidenCast Legends II: Their Namesake	Experience Norse mythology while riding in a rollercoaster.	Link	VR -	8-Jun-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
Trial of the Gods	Complete the trials and puzzles of the Egyptian God! Escape from the western Egyptian temple and seal your fate!	Link	VR -	2-Jun-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
Sword of Storms VR	Immense power lies in the legendary sword itself of sealing and driving monsters and the corpse.	Link	VR -	2-Jun-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	Remastered
Magic Together	Work together with a lot to complete obstacles and allow the tale to progress.	Link	VR -	2-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
Lordian Karma	Destroy waves of monsters with your powerful magic crowdrop and alchemical traps.	Link	VR -	29-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
Traffic cop	You are a Traffic Cop living in the 1980's.	Link	VR -	28-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
Tainted Fate	Play as a demon unwillingly summoned from the depths of hell into our world.	Link	VR -	28-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	Looks Interesting
Defension watcher	Combine the best of skill and strategy for a challenging and intense battle against the final King and his army.	Link	VR -	28-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
Poison Dots	A first person VR horror game with survival features. Capture the ancient souls.	Link	VR -	27-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	Horror
Elation	Navigate through an open-world course spanning the floating land of Elation.	Link	VR -	27-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
SACRALITH: The Archer's Tale	Help your AI companion as you pass various locations throughout the land.	Link	VR -	17-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
COMING SOON	The highest quality VR experience available for VR veterans.	Link	VR -	15-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
	An action and puzzle the coolest one.	Link	VR -	10-May-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
	One of the virtual puppet theater	Link	VR -	29-Apr-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
	a good fencing, rinky, archery game	YouTube	VR -	13-Apr-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
	with focus on comprehensive walkthrough and character's abilities.	YouTube	VR -	6-Apr-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	
	gives, trapping you in a home-built cardboard maze of evil bees & traps.	VR	VR -	4-Apr-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	Standing by Please see feedback on steam
		VR	VR -	1-Apr-2018	<div></div>	<div></div>	

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knoobbins:

LULW

rickyred:

widepeepoHappy thanks for doing VR today @sodapoppin

konokon123:

@sodapoppin ever thot of a heart monitor to ?

A_l_e_x_s

subscribed at Tier 1. They've subscribed for 22 months! Hey how are yo?

Fossabot:

Thank you for resubscribing A_l_e_x_s for 22 months

DJZeroGX:

Ninja left twitch lol

SmellyGoatZ:

gachiBASS fill the cup

StelzTV:

I'm GETTING A Drank

Nekin:

NOT EVEN 60 FPS CAM OMEGALUL

AoiCho:

Great exercise

UltraSynapticSeizureNinja:

NINJAPOPPIN Clap

Post a message

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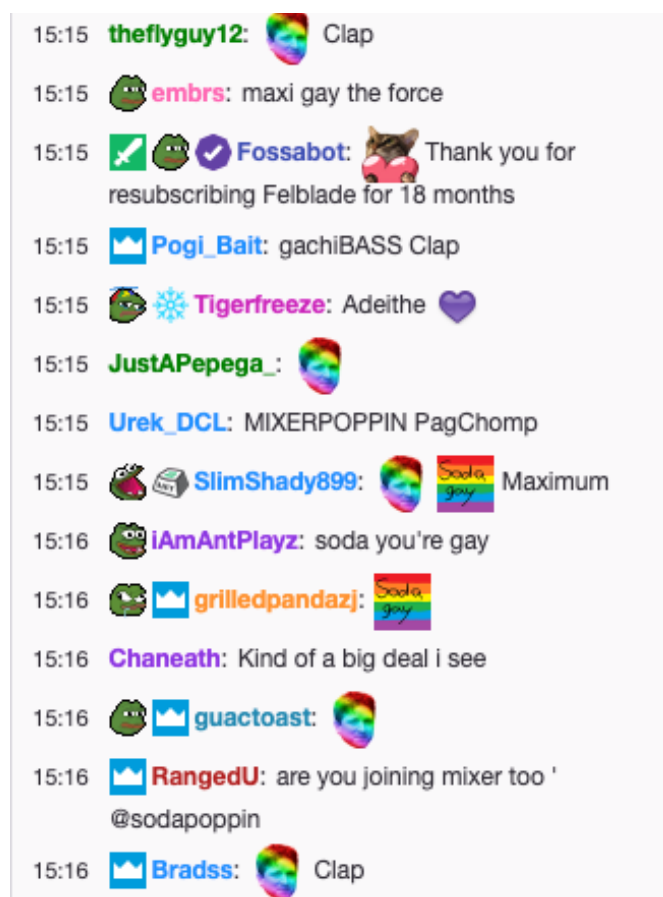


Figure 45. sodapoppin, chat view

White men comprise the vast majority of Twitch's base and engage in gender and race-based harassment as a means to assert their dominance, maintain group cohesion, and protect their imagined exclusive space from invasion by outsiders. The vast majority of the top Twitch streamers are white or white-passing, while 71.5% of all Twitch users are white (Yosilewitz, 2018), making whiteness ubiquitous to and invisible on the platform, and non-white streamers a highly visible target for racially motivated attacks (Grayson, 2019; Grayson, 2018c, Stephen, 2019). Much like the examples of Etsy and Kiva, there is a normalization and ubiquity of whiteness within Twitch as most top male

and female streamers are white or white passing. However, racial difference functions disparately on this platform as it is not seen as a celebration of diversity or heritage, but often as an opportunity to demonstrate group cohesion through harassment, racialized attacks, and exoticism of women of color. Racist language and emotes are used in streams to fortify the micro affective as over against the imagined Other, not unlike the example of homophobia in sodapoppin's stream. Perhaps more frequent than straightforward attacks against a streamer of color are instances of streamers using racial slurs themselves, or a chat responding with racist "jokes" whenever a person of color is on screen or spoken about, or anything relating to racist stereotypes is shown or spoken (i.e., a watermelon or gorilla). I did not observe any male streamers of color being directly attacked or targeted for their race, but it is worth noting that Lirik, a man of color – the only man of color observed – named Saqib Zahid, never reveals his face during streams. White female streamers have historically been attacked on Twitch and their social media platforms for dating men of color and "betraying" their race, while women of color are both exoticized and critiqued for their racial performance and identity. StreamElements, a website that tracks the top "chatters" (or chat participants), emotes, and hashtags for Twitch streamers completed a survey of 1,000 Twitch users in 2017 and found that 27% of all people surveyed had seen racial or gender bullying in live streaming while 13.4% said that they had personally been bullied while streaming (Yosilewitz, 2018). While these numbers may seem low, a clear divide emerges between the experience of particular groups when they are broken down further: 80.5% of white men stated they had "never or rarely encountered race or gender related online bullying

on streams,” while 37.5% of non-white participants did report gender or race related bullying and 20.5% of non-white males reported having personally been bullied or felt unsafe while streaming (Yosilewitz, 2018). Additionally, 46.1% of women witnessed gender or race based bullying and 47.7% of people identifying outside of the gender binary had personally experienced bullying. African Americans reported the highest numbers of racially motivated bullying, at 45.8% (Yosilewitz, 2018). These numbers reflect the disparate experiences of individuals on Twitch depending on their distance from white, cisgender masculinity, as well as white males’ striking obliviousness to the bullying of others, or, their complicity and participation in such forms of cyberbullying. Not unlike gender expectations, women are granted significantly less latitude in their options of possible roles and are more susceptible to attacks against their legitimacy as gamers and streamers. While streamers are visible targets who typically cannot hide their race or gender presentation, chat participants’ own identities are cloaked, giving their anonymity the power to make offensive comments and engage in real world attacks against streamers, marking the high stakes of aligning with audience expectations of race and gender.

Many racist taunts are coded in the various emotes and colloquialisms of the chats, revealing a layering of racist meanings and insider knowledge that is largely limited to the dedicated members of each micro affective public; it was only through careful observation and secondary research that I came to understand these covert attacks for what they were. While I only specifically saw this in the chat of one streamer, xQcOW, this is a prevalent means of communicating racism and ensuring dominant

group cohesion on the platform (Alexander, 2018). Of the channels I observed, xQcOW's had the least amount of interaction between streamer and chat; the chat was used more for spamming, or a collective posting of the same or similar sentiments (typically using emotes) in response to either what xQcOW was saying, the music video he was playing, or what was happening in his physical space. Yet these gestures did not seem to be for the benefit of the streamer himself, but to foster group cohesion and further the circulation of negative affects associated with race. xQcOW, a 23-year-old French Canadian streamer who is the 11th most watched overall, largely ignored his chat during stream, and did not appear to overtly discourage or encourage the behavior of the chat. Throughout most of his "Just Chatting" time, xQcOW played rap music and accompanying videos, with the audio and video available to the stream. Each time the chat could see or hear a black artist, they would immediately, and continuously, spam the chat with a series of emotes that are commonly understood as referring to race, or racist, but which would not be read as such to the uninitiated. Much as with homophobic emotes explored above, emotes such as "TriKool" are only visible to paid subscribers, while "TriHard" is visible to anyone – and both of these are adaptations of the face of a black male streamer, TriHex (Alexander, 2018). While the use of these emotes in response to the appearance of people of color or anything associated with them is understood as racist by Twitch users, it also functions to secure group cohesion by being in on, and participating in, the joke as much as making any one individual or group uncomfortable (as xQcOW is not black, nor can we see that any of his audience is). As with gender-based attacks, the behavior is at least partially motivated by affirming the hegemony of white masculinity and drawing the

lines of inclusivity within channels, a method that functions affectively as none of this work or insider knowledge is overtly stated, and watching the wave of spamming unfold in real time highlights the fluid nature of this exercise; if the music changes or xQcOW makes a statement that piques interest, the chat will immediately shift to flooding the screen with a new series of emotes without prompting or direction.

While racist overtures within streams such as xQcOW's highlight a crowd mentality and affective cohesion, the exoticism of female streamers and targeted attacks against white women who date men of color are as individualized as gendered harassment across the platform. Racialized targeting of women perceived to be non-white or fluent in languages other than English are meant to intimidate, shame and discredit their intersectional identity and belonging on the platform. Men, however, who are not native English speakers or who speak with a heavy accent (such as xQcOW or Forsen) are not susceptible to similar attacks and critiques, demonstrating that gender is a more significant signal of belonging to the platform than race or language; ethnicity is merely another means by which women are singled out and targeted as intruders to the gaming culture and thus inauthentic. While some male streamers, such as xQcOW and Forsen) are presumably able to speak languages other than English, only female streamers were observed to be asked to speak in another language, both as a means to critique them and sexualize their perceived foreignness or exoticism. During one stream, Pokimane, a Moroccan Canadian streamer, received numerous asks that she speak another language, including one from a chat participant who donated \$10 to have their request spoken aloud in text to speech format. Once she received the donation, she began to speak Dari for a

moment, and then later responded to another donation in French. The chat immediately responded by critiquing her physicality and sending racially inflected emojis:

hallgrimskirkja: Stop speaking baguette

temiodedina: you look so white to be brown.

Nightbot: Pokimane is 100% Moroccan [monkey emoji] ... and half korean but only when she makes a good play (Pokimane, 2019b).

The chat critiqued her racialized appearance, noting surprise that she is “brown,” while how own bot message (“Nightbot”) referred to a racial stereotype regarding Asians’ abilities in gameplay, accompanied by the emoji of a monkey as the comment notes her Moroccan heritage. In addition to critiques of her physical appearance and heritage, Pokimane is also objectified by monetary requests demanding a performance of her sexualized Otherness. It is also worth noting that Pokimane herself has come under fire for repeatedly using the N-word during streams (Katzowitz, 2019), marking her participation in a racialized affective public that privileges whiteness and derogatory statements made against people of color – including herself – and thus affirms her authenticity as a gamer and streamer; she demonstrates her ‘realness’ through adherence to racism, even when it means demeaning herself and her heritage.

The female streamer Pink_Sparkles was similarly asked by chat participants to speak languages other than English, but such demands were framed as a means to more overtly critique her as an unintelligent and attractive blonde, a stereotype which – not unlike Pokimane – she played into. During a stream, Pink_Sparkles was attempting to

give a monetary breakdown of her split rent with former roommates, and when she began having difficulties with the math, Asmongold began speaking over her and explaining the situation to her, to which she responded that she is bad at math. As Asmongold continued to mock her, she stated to the chat, “As you guys know, I’m not native English, so, English is actually my third language, so if I’m like saying some dumb stuff, uh, that’s why” (Pink_Sparkles, 2019). When the chat asked her what languages she speaks and about her ethnic heritage, she responds to their questions in English, and then speaks in Swedish at their request, to which they responded with critiques and enthusiasm:

GDAX: talk Swedish

Feces123: @pink_sparkles could you say something in polish and Swedish?

AshronGW2: no French ?

rdzeniuu: @Pink_Sparkles do you know polish or swedish?

Polexx: @pink_sparkles you have a american accent when speaking Swedish

OmgKoda: I’m Swedish also though. Sick.

Brauste98: You have to learn swedich agin was relly bad (Pink_Sparkles, 2019).

In this instance, chat participants oscillated between making demands of her, critiquing her language skills, and relating through shared heritage, demonstrating how women are intimidated into performing, shamed and discredited for any perceived faults, and utilized as a means to facilitate group cohesion and a sense of intimacy with the streamer. In the examples of Pokimane and Pink_Sparkles’ experiences, the women’s identity as women

and ethnically Other supersede their identities as gamers or streamers, as opposed to male streamers who are not exoticized in the same way – they are not seen as sexual objects, but as gamers who happen to be from another country or ethnicity. These moments of exoticism and racialized demands demonstrate how women are viewed as available for sexual fantasy and fulfillment as well as the unequal power dynamics between a female streamer and mostly white male audiences who seek to subvert control of the stream and the dominant narrative therein. Along these lines, women facilitate the cohesion of the affective public not through their tone setting or authority in the stream, but their (degree of) willingness to participate in their own subjugation as a way to maintain their legitimacy.

The domination of white masculinity and the availability of white women for these men as an affirmation of the affective public constructed around the authenticity of this dynamic is also maintained through attacks on white female streamers who engage in romantic relationships with men of color. In October of 2017, Pink_Sparkles was cyberbullied across social media platforms for posting photos of herself with her (at the time) Asian boyfriend, with commenters making racist claims against him, and insinuating that she must only be with him for money or as a fetish (Yu, 2017). In September of 2017, STPeach likewise began receiving racist attacks online for dating an Asian man and continues to receive regular harassment regarding their relationship, including that she is a “race traitor” (General, 2019), and was the victim of swatting – the practice of sending armed police to someone’s house under false pretenses, such as claiming the person has hostages and weapons – in late December of 2017 (Woo, 2018).

These attacks, and their motivations rooted in identity markers, speak to the expectation that female streamers be available for (white) men as sexual objects – their primary means of ensuring claims of legitimacy through Twitch, and the extent to which men will act in order to police the bodies and actions of these women. Female streamers are not seen primarily as streamers, gamers, or professionals in many instances, but rather as objects of male fantasies, and breaking this illusion, within the Twitch and gamer community, is worthy of internet-based and real-world attacks.

Yet while these women faced punishment from within the community for their refusal to fully succumb to demands of their sexual subservience, many other streamers have faced threats and acts of violence simply for their increased visibility as streamers and microcelebrities, further demonstrating the extent to which violence is endemic to Twitch and the purview of its extended affective public. As streamers increase their celebrity and visibility through consistent streaming and integrating their physical space as a form of monetization and entrepreneurialism, they also increase their vulnerability to forms of harassment and abuse, from spamming and trolling to doxing and swatting. Doxing (the digital publishing of private or identifiable information about an individual) and swatting (sending police and emergency response teams to another person's address, usually through the false reporting that this person is involved in a bomb threat, murder, or hostage situation) have become prominent and dangerous forms of targeting specific streamers by malicious community members that can lead to streamers leaving the platform and/or becoming victims of police violence. Just after my observation period ended, BrookeAB announced that she was taking a hiatus from Twitch after receiving

multiple doxing threats against herself and her family (Banks, 2019). She was absent from the site for approximately three months before returning to full-time streaming in October of 2019 – just one example of a streamer quickly returning to the platform after threats of violence as they depend on this precarious and unstable form of income to survive. Kaceytron has moved repeatedly after being swatted, and in one instance “when the SWAT team busted open the door, guns out, her autistic little brother was home, and was scared witless by the invasion” (D’Anastasio, 2018b). In September of 2018 Dr Disrespect was forced to stop a livestream when someone shot into his home, breaking a window (Grayson, 2018a), while a 28-year old streamer was killed in December of 2017 by police after they received a false report of a hostage situation (Van Allen, 2017). Each of these examples demonstrates how the actions of people in digital publics and the Twitch community are not separate from their lived experiences and physical realities, and that there are significant negative consequences to the intimacy they foster with audiences and the depth of their personal lives they share, as these divulgences are one-way; while the micro affective publics of Twitch are multi-directional with both streamers and audience members participating in its construction, it is ultimately the streamer, as the public figure, who takes on the risks and stands to reap financial rewards. Perhaps more than other markers, it is their willingness to risk bodily harm that demonstrates streamers’ authenticity and dedication to gaming and Twitch.

Gender and raced-based attacks are effective and enduring not just because they reflect and amplify existing Western norms and inequities, but because the negative affects associated with these practices circulate and become attached to persons and

spaces and cohere in the digital crowd. Thinking specifically about hate, Sara Ahmed writes that “hate cannot be found in one figure, but works to create the very outline of different figures or objects of hate, a creation that crucially aligns the figures together and constitutes them as a ‘common’ threat... [hate] circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119). Expanding this to think of negative affects more broadly, negativity here is an *association* – the negative feeling is associated with an imagined individual (the streamer) which then creates that very individual as a reality, at least in the mind and experience of the person or persons investing in the negative feeling (the audience). Once this individual associated with a negative feeling becomes a reality, they must necessarily be defined as other than the person who feels negatively toward them, as this object of negativity must necessarily be substantively different, and thus deserving of derision or “displacement”. In other words, a woman is not automatically worthy of hate because of her identity, but because someone outside of that category invests in a negative feeling toward the woman and defines “woman” as inherently different from themselves and deserving of hate because of their difference, their status as Other. But once these categories can be defined, and defined against each other – woman and man, as an example – then they also create divisive *communities* of difference; negativity can then become a shared response by the imagined “ordinary” identity against a community of difference, or Other.

This logic of the investment in negative affects that define the self and Other is heightened in a digital space such as Twitch which is a particularly insular community with rigid norms and the strong domination of one group – white cisgender and

heterosexual men over and against any other identity groups. The dominant identity group, or self, is not only defined against the Other, but is also significantly under attack by their encroachment into a particular space (Ahmed, 2004, p. 118), which in this case is the homogenous gaming culture of the platform Twitch. As a digital space with overlapping micro affective publics, negative sentiments directed toward minorities become amplified and repeated in a way that reflects their affective character as well as the particularity of digital technology. Indeed, the “collaboratively discursive logic” of stream chats and the use therein of emojis, emotes, and repetitive statements by users “function as affective mechanisms that amplify the awareness of a particular feeling, the intensity with which it is felt” (Papacharissi, p. 118), reinforcing the unequal dynamics of power, harassment and the capacity for self-representation and monetization by streamers. The circulation of negative affects can clearly be seen in the example of “Gamergate,” in which men identified with “geek masculinity” – an alternative form of toxic masculinity – engaged in aggressive and misogynistic behavior toward women who they felt were infringing on their exclusive digital space of gaming (Braithwaite, p. 3). In their narrative, “Gamergaters” saw themselves as victims of a feminine invasion, which increased their identification with each other (Braithwaite, p. 6), and against women as the Other, while their gender-based aggressions reverberated throughout digital spaces, creating an affective resonance and reifying the affective public.

This chapter has examined how the affective matrix of identity formation in the emergent field of esports and livestreaming paired with markers of authenticity and legitimacy in this realm function in the specific iteration of Twitch, encouraging

streamers to engage in aspirational labor, or the pursuit of doing what one loves in the hope of getting paid (eventually), largely through subscriptions and donations procured from their demanding and anonymous audience. Streamers (and to some extent audience members) perform their authenticity as gamers and members of Twitch's affective public through adherence to rigid standards of traditional gender and exoticized racial identity, as well as the necessity of demonstrating a high level of game play, which are policed through chat-based and real world attacks. Streamers adhere to (or draw satirical attention to) the strict gendered and racialized norms of the platform and devote their full selves as sites of labor in order to be viewed as authentic and orient themselves, and by extension their followers and fans, toward the good life – particularly as a select few streamers are able to establish a certain level of celebrity and wealth from this path. Perhaps more than the examples of Etsy and Kiva, performing one's authenticity and belonging to Twitch has incredibly high stakes, as streamers invest themselves in this presumably leisure activity as a site of income-generating labor, while aware of the potential risk of violence to themselves and those they love. The affective public of Twitch, then, coheres as much around exclusivity and threats of violence as much as the capacity to engender a sense of belonging and hope, perpetuating the circulation of negative affects and toxic masculinity.

5. Conclusion

Affect and the building of affective relationships have emerged as key components of contemporary digital interactions and concomitant monetary transactions, particularly in spaces where individuals become entrepreneurs of the self, investing their full capacity in, and pursuing self-fulfillment through, their labor. In sites such as Etsy, Kiva and Twitch that rely on the performance of authenticity and the perception of intimacy and shared values or experience, users participate in the construction of affective (micro) publics that cohere around shared sentiments and ideological commitments. Yet, paradoxically, these same users – particularly the micro entrepreneurs – who are brought together through orientation toward literal and figurative happy objects, are individualized in their embodiment of neoliberal ideals and pursuit of the good life; their successes and failures are positioned as the result of their own passion and hard work, or lack thereof – not structural inequalities or systemic issues. In this way, users affirm the validity of neoliberal ideals including an emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility for one's life position and perpetuate cruel optimism, or the deferral of their own attainment of happiness or the good life onto an imagined future. The affective connections experienced by users are likewise individualized, creating the perception that buyers and sellers or lenders and borrowers are having meaningful,

affective interactions, despite the general lack of direct interaction between parties and the intentionally broad appeal crafted by the static narratives of Etsy sellers and Kiva borrowers. While there may be less mediation between streamers and their viewers, there remains a pressure to conform to audience expectations and affirm the affective public, limiting the capacity of streamers to demonstrate the ‘realness’ demanded by their peers.

The affective publics of these spaces – Etsy, Kiva and Twitch – are organized by neoliberal ideologies, embodied in the literal and figurative representations of the good life, or happy objects, amplifying sentiments and drawing users together around (the imagining of) shared ideals. Broadly these neoliberal ideologies include personal responsibility, individualization and the tolerance, or celebration, of diversity – a toothless multiculturalism that negates the complex matrices of oppression individuals and communities face as a result of their intersectional identities. Within each site, these ideologies are given a different valence, in line with corporate narratives and the demographics of users, situating Etsy within a postfeminist discourse that touts the image of an empowered woman who embraces self-entrepreneurialism and self-fulfillment alongside a return to domesticity and traditional gender roles. Kiva, meanwhile, as a nonprofit and affective public, is largely structured through neocolonialism, or the use of capitalism (seen in microloans) and cultural imperialism to indirectly rule subjugated populations across the globalized world. While both Etsy and Kiva frame their ideological commitments as positive relationships to self-actualization and the pursuit of the good life for all users, Twitch is defined by digital misogyny and cyberbullying, which enforces adherence to traditional gender roles and racialization through more

overtly violent means. Despite the varied ideologies that structure the affective publics of these sites, micro entrepreneurs within each are expected to demonstrate their ‘authenticity,’ or their commitment to the goals and narrative of each site, proving themselves worthy of the affective and monetary investment of users.

While authenticity is a performative mode of self-representation rather than a category of identity, with the specific markers of ‘authenticity’ varying according to the ideological commitments of each platform, it is treated as identifiable and stable by users, who hold each other to its standards. The stakes for adequate performance of this identity is crucial for micro entrepreneurs, as it contributes to the construction of their being understood as a successful neoliberal citizen, or entrepreneur of the self, who is in active pursuit of the good life, which donors, lenders and buyers can align themselves with too through affective interactions and economic exchange. Generally across the sites and in line with neoliberal ideals, authenticity is connected with feminized labor including following one’s passion, or doing what one loves, typically through a creative pursuit, such as Etsy selling or developing a niche gaming persona, as well as adherence to traditional binary gender roles of a cisgender heteronormativity that is often connected to domesticity and the nuclear family. Users also perform authenticity through being hard working, including the high-level gameplay expected of Twitch streamers, or the capacity to empower others who are hard-working, as evinced by Kiva lenders’ embrace of borrower narratives that highlight this personal quality. Authenticity is also performed through celebrations of diversity in Etsy, as sellers draw connections to a nostalgic and imagined past through goods imbued with the materials or emotions of their ancestry.

Diversity takes a more divisive turn in the spaces of Kiva and Twitch, with whiteness being the norm against which the exoticized Other is defined. In Kiva, borrowers are constructed as needy Others from a temporally and geographically distant place, affirming the structurally dominant position of Western lenders who thus feel enabled to help those beneath them in the hierarchy of success. In Twitch, departures from the norm of whiteness result in overtly racist attacks and policing, including the use of racist overtures at even the mention of blackness or demands that white women date men within their race, or at least remain available as a sexual fantasy. While the authenticity demanded of Twitch users is no less performative than the other sites, I have hinted that there is an undercurrent of sentiment among users that the authenticity within this platform is somehow less curated and more ‘real’ due to its live and unscripted interactions, with violent responses for those who fail to conform. The elevated stakes of this demand suggests that there is an emergent pushback against the constructed and idyllic images found in marketplaces like Etsy or social media platforms such as Instagram that is being led by this decidedly younger demographic, and which ironically is similarly demanding a particular performance from its users. It remains unclear how this emergent structure of feeling will unfold or what it will mean for how authenticity and affective relationships are understood moving forward, as digital micro entrepreneurialism only expands and becomes more ubiquitous to the landscape of our digital lives.

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Biography

Kayla Keener received her PhD in Cultural Studies from George Mason University with fields of expertise in Affect & Media and Gender & Neoliberal Political Economy. She broadly studies affect, digital labor and intersectional identities, and has published previously on the affective circulation of fake news. An article titled “Alternative Facts and Fake News: Digital Mediation and the Affective Spread of Hate in the Era of Trump” appeared in *The Journal of Hate Studies* and a chapter titled “Affect, Aesthetics and Attention: The Digital Spread of Fake News Across the Political Spectrum” can be found in the edited volume titled *Affect, Emotion, and Rhetorical Persuasion in Mass Communication*. She earned an MA in Women’s Studies with an emphasis in Culture, Globalization and Development from The George Washington University, and a BA with an emphasis in Cross-Cultural Analysis of Gender through Religion, Literature and Activism from the University of Redlands.