SELF-BRANDING, HOTNESS, AND GIRLHOOD IN THE VIDEO BLOGS OF JENNA MARBLES

EMMA MAGUIRE

We are the media.

—Amanda Palmer

Jenna Mourey, more commonly known as Jenna Marbles, is one of a host of new media entertainers who are using the homemade video publishing site YouTube to gain large audiences and turn their self-representations into profitable personal brands. Mourey became a celebrity in 2010 when she created a self-mocking video titled “How to Trick People Into Thinking You’re Good Looking.” The video, which featured Mourey putting on make-up for her job as a go-go dancer, was first posted for her friends on Facebook, but it quickly went viral and Mourey used this initial flood of exposure to launch a successful YouTube career. Under the Jenna Marbles brand, Mourey has maintained a top spot as one of YouTube’s most subscribed vloggers (video bloggers), and has amassed millions of “friends,” fans, and followers on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (O’Leary). When she began making vlogs on YouTube, Mourey worked several casual jobs to support herself: she worked as a go-go dancer and promotional model at night, and during the day she worked alternately for a tanning salon and as a writer for the sports news website Barstool Sports. She now creates self-made vlogs for a living. Today she understands her audience as composed mainly of teenage girls, although when she began vlogging her videos were aimed at the young men who comprised the demographic for Barstool Sports (Rhett and Link). Mourey is in her late twenties and so is, herself, a youthful feminine subject.

In this essay I explore how Mourey’s “Jenna Marbles” self-brand has continued to find success in this commoditized, networked media context, which can be a hostile space for girls and young women. I am particularly interested in how Mourey negotiates the demand for girls to market themselves as hot
or sexy products for consumption. Drawing on Ariel Levy’s work on raunch culture, I propose that Mourey has developed a strategy to get around this weighted system which requires girls to perform “hot” (if they want to be shareable and consumable), but which also punishes them for it. According to Levy, “hotness has become our cultural currency,” and “when it pertains to women, hot means two things in particular: fuckable and salable” (31). For Levy, hotness is a means to success for women in a culture that not only commoditizes their sexuality, but encourages women to sexualize and commoditize themselves to become hot products. With this understanding of the term in mind, I argue that Mourey refuses to take up the “hot girl” as an identity, and instead uses it as a position or location that she can move in and out of across her multiple platforms for autobiographical representation. Here, she is able to utilize the benefits of being visible in digital markets as a hot, sexy female while simultaneously working to avoid the traps of objectification and subordination that performing feminine hotness often entails.

Mourey’s self-representations circulate in networked, multimedia, social spaces among a plethora of other digital selves. The contexts for, and processes of, self-mediation are key to understanding how the Jenna Marbles personal brand works as a composite cultural text across media platforms and digital spaces. To emphasize these conditions of self-mediation, I suggest that we might read Mourey’s texts as automedia (rather than autobiography, self-expression, or something else). The first part of this essay expands on the framework of automediality, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have used the term, through which I examine Mourey’s text. I then look at how videos circulate on YouTube, and how this commoditized space shapes the kinds of girlhood subjectivities that are created there. Finally, I take a closer look at Mourey’s first viral video as a way to examine how this automedial text makes use of hotness and parody to negotiate the gendered pressures of the media context in which it circulates.

**AUTOMEDIA: READING MEDIATED LIVES**

The last decade has seen an expansion of platforms for self-representation that have been taken up with gusto by users around the globe. From networked interfaces such as LiveJournal, MySpace, and Facebook to Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (to name but a handful of the most successful sites), those with access to Internet technology have engaged with an abundant variety of digital modes to mediate their lives and consume the lives of others. This proliferation of online activity that engages autobiographical modes of textual practice urgently requires life writing scholars to develop and rethink the range of conceptual tools and strategies for addressing acts of self-representation to include
media such as blogs, tweets, status updates, avatars, and a variety of digital personas. One strategy, which I adopt in this essay, is to understand Mourey’s text via a framework of what Smith and Watson have usefully termed “automediality,” a term they adapted from European work on self-representational practices across a variety of media, and which can loosely be described as an approach that allows for “an expansion of the field of self-representation beyond the literary to consider cultural and media practices” (Reading Autobiography 168). Tweets, blog posts, or an Instagram account can be understood through the lens of automediality as autobiographical texts that we can interpret. Crucially, automedial texts are shaped by the networks of production and consumption in which they circulate.

Smith and Watson have recently expanded on their initial description. Summarizing Nick Couldry, they suggest that

media cannot simply be conceptualized as “tools” for presenting a pre-existing, essential self. Rather, the materiality of the medium constitutes and textures the subjectivity presented. . . . Media technologies . . . do not just transparently present the self. They constitute and expand it. (“Virtually Me” 77)

Drawing on this work, I have suggested elsewhere that an automedial approach takes for granted that the self is “brought into being through the processes of mediation,” rather than understanding the automedial text as simply the storied form of a preexisting subject.

In addition, Julie Rak, in her consideration of an automedial approach, argues for a deeper interrogation of the relationship between narrative and (autobiographical) text. Rak asks whether narrative is a necessary part of an analysis of the lives and selves created, for example, in game-play such as The Sims, where players go about the business of daily life via digital avatars (3–5). Certainly, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are open-ended and defy print-based understandings of narrative structure and form. The rhetorical forms they employ require us to rethink the narrative in life narrative.

In summary, the three key ideas underpinning an automedial approach to autobiographical texts, and which guide my reading of Mourey’s video and the Jenna Marbles self-brand, are the imperative (urged by digital technologies) to move beyond the literary in considering how people narrate their lives; an acknowledgement that media technologies shape the kinds of selves that can be represented, so this reality should form part of how we consider the lives that are mediated; and the possibilities of rethinking how we implicate the idea of narrative in a scholarly treatment of autobiographical representation. The aim of an automedial approach is to discover what texts can tell us about cultural understandings of selfhood and what it means to portray “real” life and “real” selves through media. The emphasis is on thinking critically about mediation.
Several significant contexts shape Jenna Marbles as an automedial self. This self is composed of a range of interlaced digital texts that are able to circulate independently (for example, Instagram selfies, single YouTube videos that are shared on Facebook, and tweets from Jenna Marbles’s Twitter account), but that also work together to constitute the Jenna Marbles personal brand. Consumers of Mourey’s automedial self cannot hold a single cohesive version of Mourey’s story in their hands, as readers can with a memoir. Mourey’s friends and followers do not reach “the end” of her self-representation, as readers do when they complete the final page of a printed autobiography—at least not as long as Mourey continues to post photos on Instagram, update her blog, tweet, and upload new videos. And Mourey’s audience has the capacity to shape, speak to, and change her self-representations as they interact with these texts via their own automedial avatars, profiles, and accounts (such as when they engage in the social functions of social media, for example, by leaving comments on Mourey’s videos, or by participating in Twitter conversations with her). Such digital practices of self-mediation and networked autobiographical engagement provide a rich set of texts for analysis that can tell us more about how digital spaces are shaping contemporary notions of self.

Mourey’s primary mode of production, though, is the video blog, and it is important to note that the kinds of autobiographical subjects that emerge in the YouTube landscape are not incidental—they are shaped by the medium’s “affordances” and conventions (Morrison 117). Some of these conventions include the measuring of video views and subscriber tallies; the medium (shareable audiovisual content); the possibilities of audience feedback; and the integration of these videos with networked multi-platform identities. These vital elements of the media landscape must be considered when reading lives like Mourey’s that are represented on YouTube.

For example, the format used to advertise videos to viewers on YouTube—a thumbnail still image combined with a descriptive title—enables Mourey in her first viral video, “How to Trick People into Thinking You’re Good Looking,” to both exploit the selling power of attractive youthful femininity and at the same time challenge it. Thumbnails are the static images that appear as a form of “front cover,” enticing the reader to open, or click on, a YouTube video and watch it. They are integral to marketing YouTube videos and gaining viewers. In “How to Trick” Mourey takes on the persona of Jenna Marbles to parody the makeup tutorial genre, which is a huge market for female video bloggers. The typical beauty vlogger will begin with no make-up and gradually transform herself with cosmetics and beauty tools into a particular “look” while giving how-to commentary. In Mourey’s parody, though, the look that she achieves is not the pretty perfection that is often featured in typical tutorials, but rather an exaggerated caricature of synthetic Hollywood beauty.
Mourey begins with a clean face and gradually applies heavy makeup while dispensing ironic and self-deprecating remarks about her appearance. She tells the viewer “if you were born really ugly, like me, have no fear—there’s steps you can take to be good looking.” As she takes the viewer through her beauty routine, she ridicules the amount of makeup it takes to transform her into “a human optical illusion,” or more specifically, a “good looking” girl. Mourey’s robotic performance, nasal voice, and ironic commentary effectively convey that the video is not an authentic tutorial. However, the thumbnail that Mourey has used to market this vlog is a low-resolution still from the video that shows her with a full face of make-up. In this format, Mourey’s self-representation is not discernable as a parody; rather, the still image works in conjunction with the video’s title to signify a standard beauty tutorial. When the viewer clicks on the video and it begins to play, however, they are confronted with Mourey’s parody. This trick amounts to a playful intervention in audience expectations. This intervention relies on the affordances of YouTube that create a space for play in the gap between the static surface of the video (the thumbnail and title) and the video content itself. In the video content Mourey, as Jenna Marbles, is not a static image; rather, she has the ability to complicate the consumption of her self-representation by literally speaking (and speaking back) to consumers of her digital self. Although the video promises the audience a synthetically attractive girl, perhaps for their viewing pleasure or perhaps as a model that they can emulate, Mourey breaks this promise and intervenes in the consumption of her “good looking” image by instead offering a parody that runs counter to the viewer’s expectations.

But platforms like YouTube are not fixed spaces: they are adapted over time in response to changes in technology as well as user feedback and behaviors. These changes in media platforms enable, disable, and shape the kinds of automedial representations that can be created. As an example, Laurie McNeill points to the recent introduction of the Timeline on Facebook, which
imposed on users’ profiles a chronological, searchable, and storied structure that reorganized the previously fragmented identities constructed by Facebook profiles. As YouTube changes, affordances like the gap between thumbnail and content will change. These transformations will require scholars to reexamine the impacts on automedial practice in these spaces.

**SELF-BRANDING: COMMUNITY, COMMERCE, AND THE SELF ON YOUTUBE**

YouTube is one of many user-generated media sharing platforms that are making their way into the everyday lives and the media cultures of consumers around the world. The circulation of media is no longer divided into producers and consumers; as a result, Axel Bruns has suggested the term “produsers” as a way to describe the position of the producer/consumer/user in the current (digital) media economy (2). The dialectic of community and commerce underpins YouTube’s environment (Snickars and Vonderau 12), and the self-representations that are created circulate as commodities in an online media economy where survival is measured in video views, subscriber tallies, likes, and shares. YouTube’s millions of produsers are able to produce and upload their videos to the site in minutes, creating a glut of content: YouTube estimates that over 100 hours of video are uploaded to the site every minute (“Statistics”). In such a saturated market, competition is fierce for content creators who hope to find a viewership for their videos.

But what is the motivation for gaining video views and subscribers? As well as the thrill of having a video blog that “goes viral,” there are also material gains at stake here due to the introduction of advertising on the site. Content creators have the option to “monetize” their videos, meaning that they elect to have advertising appear in conjunction with their content: they can choose where, how often, and what kinds of advertisements are placed in and around their videos (“What is the YouTube Partner Program?”). When viewers click on these advertisements, the creator receives a small dollar amount from YouTube—the more people who watch a video, the more likely it is that people will click on the ad. With this income dependent on the amount of traffic that a video can garner, the creator’s drive is to produce content that is “like”-able and shareable, and which will be watched lots of times by lots of people. For example, Mourey’s videos are uploaded onto her Jenna Marbles channel. The channel has registered, at the time of this writing, 1.6 billion video views in total (“Jenna Marbles YouTube Stats”), which puts her estimated yearly revenue at between US$144,000 and US$1.2m (“YouTube Statistics for Jenna Marbles”). In comparison, the channel of Lauren Curtis, Australia’s most prominent beauty vlogger, has garnered only 136,000 views (“Laurenbeautyy You-Tube Stats”), which puts her estimated revenue at between US$42,900 and
US$333,000 (“YouTube Statistics for Laurenbeautyy”). Of course, Curtis is still a successful vlogger and she is also able to make a living from her YouTube channel. For those like Mourey and Curtis working in the autobiographical medium of video blogs, this advertising structure based on video views and subscriber tallies means creating a self that users want to buy.

A way to understand these self-representations, then, is to see them as part of the broader cultural practice of self-branding. Girlhood media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser draws on Zygmunt Bauman to observe that “this branded context for living supports practices by which individuals craft identities ‘as products capable of catching attention and attracting demand and customers’” (285). In other words, self-branding encourages people to think of themselves as products and to use the logic of commercial culture to market themselves in particular ways (278). In contrast to print media autobiographies that rely on publishing houses and agents to market an authorial self, the self-brand of a YouTuber relies on the absence (or at least the appearance of the absence) of commercial or corporate interference. The YouTube vlogger’s appeal stems from the seeming authenticity and apparently real personality expressed through such self-marketing platforms as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Audience members are able to make contact with the YouTube vlogger through their own automedial selves (for example, their Instagram accounts, or their Facebook profiles), where the platform becomes a meeting place to discover one another. These sites for autobiographical engagement have become spaces where produsers develop and promote their personal brands.

The ways in which girls and women are represented in advertising media continue to be one of the grounds on which battles about gender and representation are fought. But in the age of produsage the mainstream media can no longer be thought of as an elite body that dictates the cultural and consumer agenda. As alternative musician and performer Amanda Palmer—famous for her success in using digital media to self-promote, fund, and distribute her music—reminds her fans, “we are the media”: crucially, as Palmer demonstrates, some girls and women are now able to create and publish their own representations. But in a landscape flooded with content, girls must compete fiercely to gain traction via the currency of likes, fans, views, and subscribers. To find success in commercial arenas of produsage like YouTube, girls must find and hold an audience for their self-representations.

**NEGOTIATING GIRLHOOD AND COMPETING FOR AN AUDIENCE**

Although there is a temptation to see this participatory media culture as egalitarian, 5 Henry Jenkins, in *Convergence Culture*, reminds us that “Not all participants are created equal,” and that “some consumers” as well as produsers
“have greater abilities to participate . . . than others” (3). As I have been suggesting, girls occupy a contested place in terms of representation on the site. An important point here is that, despite lingering assumptions to the contrary, the Internet is not an egalitarian space.

At the time of this writing, it has become evident that the utopian fantasies of the World Wide Web popular in the 1990s have been challenged and dispelled. However, underlying much of the contemporary popular discourse of Internet celebrity is the pervasive, and deceptive, suggestion that because many ordinary people have become online celebrities, anyone can become a star in this “new” media economy.6 This prominent narrative has led many to believe that the digital realm is a separate world, a new democratic frontier where everyone is a cyber-equal. But this belief is simply not true. And critics like Lisa Nakamura, in her essay “Cyberrace,” show how broader cultural values and prejudices flow between digital and real world spaces. Nakamura argues that web spaces are a continuation of the “real world” rather than an escape from it. As she draws on Tiziana Terranova, Nakamura describes the “outernet” as “the network of social, cultural and economic relationships which crisscrosses and exceeds the Internet—surround[ing] and connect[ing] the latter to larger flows of labour, culture and power” (46). She urges scholars to “move beyond the notion that cyberspace is about escaping reality in order to understand how the reality of the internet is deeply connected to the development of late postindustrial societies as a whole” (46). Public web spaces like YouTube are often spaces that allow for sexist behaviors and ideas to flourish, and girls are also often more vulnerable here given the complicated position they occupy in the Western neoliberal media economy. Indeed, many viewer comments that appear on Mourey’s videos are incredibly sexist. For example, one viewer under the handle Ivan Benja asserts that “How to Trick People” shows “how girls can change from themselves, to a whore,” and laments sarcastically, “Cause this world doesn’t have enough sluts.” Like the so-called real world that they must also navigate, girls are required to manage the impressions of others who consume and share their self-representations in such digital terrains. However, if girl vloggers want to find an audience for their content, they must find ways to navigate the pressures of sexism and to sell their self-brands.

As in the real world, many girls are navigating these pressures: they are speaking back, and they are using self-representation to compete in the highly competitive YouTube landscape. To what degree these girls achieve material success and popularity is, however, often uncertain and difficult to measure. As a recent Guardian article observes, “There is no shortage of excellent female vloggers but they have nothing close to the following of their male counterparts” (Lewis). And at least in the current moment, this is mostly true—with the exception of Jenna Marbles.
Jenna Mourey as Jenna Marbles is one young woman who is navigating this fraught territory and who has managed to acquire and maintain a top spot as one of YouTube’s most subscribed video bloggers. At the time of this writing, Jenna Marbles is the fourth most subscribed on YouTube, and she is the only female in this elite group of top bloggers. Her nearest female competitor is Yuya, a Spanish language beauty blogger, who is the twentieth most-subscribed blogger. Of course, Mourey is white, middle-class, college educated, and North American. These markers of privilege are, I suggest, significant factors in Mourey’s visibility and success, and telling of the context of YouTube. Despite this point, it is worth noting that there are lots of white, middle-class, educated, female bloggers out there, the majority of whom never become famous: Mourey is clearly doing something differently, as evidenced by her unique popularity and wealth. So how has she created such a successful self-brand in a highly competitive market that admits so few young female players?

Mourey’s success hinges on the way that she plays with visibility and with what it means to be a young, visible, female subject in this context where self-branding is an “increasingly normative” mode of representation and sociality on the Internet (Banet-Weiser 278). It is difficult to be young and female, successful and visible, in the entertainment media; indeed, the mainstream culture requires girls to negotiate and justify their positions unendingly if they want to occupy such privileged public space. As Jenna Marbles’s first viral video “How to Trick People into Thinking You’re Good Looking” makes clear, her capacity to play with visibility and to negotiate the market’s demands of young women is central to her autobiographical performance and to her self-brand. And at the core of this performance is a negotiation of “hotness.”

What does hotness mean for the young feminine subject in today’s networked, social, entertainment culture? As I noted, Ariel Levy in Female Chauvinist Pigs describes how hotness has become a kind of “cultural currency” (31) that encourages women to commoditize their sexuality and to market themselves as hot or sexy products “in exchange for other things” (183)—here, video views and subscribers. Levy explains that “Proof that a woman actively seeks approval is a crucial criterion for hotness in the first place” (33, my emphasis), but this is where Mourey presents a departure. This active search for approval as a hot/sexy product through girls’ self-representation on social media is often a magnet for abusive detractors who label girls “attention whores” or “selfie sluts.” Indeed, Levy does illustrate that there is a shaming of this kind of attention-seeking behavior at the same time as the culture also encourages it (98–101). What I propose, however, is that Jenna Marbles has developed a strategy to get around this unfair system which requires young girls to perform
“hot” (if they want to be shareable and consumable), but which also punishes them for doing so. In other words, Mourey refuses to take up the hot girl as her subjectivity, but rather uses it as a position or location that she can move in and out of across her multiple platforms for autobiographical representation.

In “How to Trick People,” Mourey positions, via parody, the hot girl as a “trick” or an “illusion.” Mourey tells the viewer with an amused smile that “the goal is to make yourself look nothing like yourself.” She draws attention to the fakery involved in her appearance by confessing plainly that she has “bleached the absolute shit out of my hair,” and applied “fake self-tanner.” She then advises the viewer to “literally cake a bunch of make-up on your face,” and heavy-handedly apply eye make-up: “I like black,” remarks Mourey, “because it says, I’m a whore.” From there, Mourey shows the viewer how to apply “fake whore lashes” and “cartoon eyebrows.” Between each instruction, the video jump cuts to an increasingly unrecognizable Mourey as she applies more and more makeup. She speaks in the robotic monotone of a Stepford wife, and cautions, “don’t forget your hoochie lipstick!” as the video cuts to a shot of Mourey wearing thickly-applied bright pink lipstick and a frozen smile. In her commentary, Mourey uses sexist language to mock the artificial good looks of the Barbie look-alike into which she transforms. Certainly this tactic anticipates a hostile viewer who will dispense such insults as a way of punishing Mourey for an attention-seeking self-representation. However, by labeling herself a “whore” first, she robs such hostile viewers of some of their power. This strategy of attaching sexist insults to hotness works to show that Mourey is simply performing a role mainstream society expects of girls while also emphasizing how girls are punished for enacting it.

In short, Mourey draws attention to the artificial nature of her attractive representation in the video, and rather than claiming hotness for herself and staking her right to take up (digital) space upon it, she distances herself from it. Mourey invites the viewer to see the hot girl that she transforms into as a mask or perhaps a character as opposed to her true self. She accomplishes this outcome by providing an alternative version of herself against which to contrast the hot Jenna. At the beginning of the video she appears without make-up, and the video suggests that this image is the real Jenna. She even shows three photographs of herself (also without makeup) as evidence from the real world that an authentic version of Jenna exists. This strategy works to distance Mourey from the location of hotness, and to make it clear that she does not seek to claim hotness as her identity. As the photographic images flash onto the screen, her voiceover explains, “I like to leave all of my old Facebook pictures on Facebook so that everyone can know that I really am an ugly motherfucker.” Part of her use of photographs is a deliberate strategy to avoid criticism of the inauthentic self-representation on social media—inauthentic because it depicts an
ideal or flattering image rather than an accurate representation of the subject. Mourey expects her audience to undermine her hot appearance and to label her a fraud. By using photographs of herself as a form of proof that she is not really good-looking, she implies that the dolled-up girl is a construct, and not the “real” Jenna. At the same time, she still gets to perform the hot girl, even as she is undermining that role. In fact, her brand relies heavily on the performance of hotness: each official photograph of Mourey that appears on her various social media accounts—from Instagram to Tumblr to Facebook and Twitter—shows her heavily made-up and projecting a hot identity that adheres to normative standards of feminine attractiveness.

I have been suggesting that by using her online self-representation to distance herself from her hot girl persona, Mourey critiques the social order that objectifies, commoditizes, and sexualizes girls. This video under discussion is particularly interesting because the make-up that Mourey applies is the actual make-up that she would have worn to her job as a go-go dancer. Go-go dancers are promotional models paid to attend events and provide entertainment to guests by being on display (sometimes on a stage) as they dance. As a go-go dancer, punters read Mourey for their viewing pleasure: in this role, she existed as an object of the male gaze. As the subject of an autobiographical performance on YouTube, Mourey can gaze back. Indeed, Mourey has called her work as a dancer into question, stating in an interview with Dana Ward that “unfortunately that really was my real life.” Elsewhere Mourey reflects on her dance career and the moment that inspired her to create “How to Trick People”:

One day I was going home from . . . the office [at Barstool Sports] and I still needed to go-go dance later that night . . . and I was like . . . I’m tired of people introducing themselves to me during the day and then introducing themselves to me later that night because they have no idea that I’m the same person. I looked so completely different. And I understand the “gender norm” that you’re a girl and you look a certain way and that means this sort of thing and whatever, but I very much play into it. I put myself in all of this makeup to look like a different person in order to . . . make a living. . . . it’s a joke, it sucks, I hate it. So, I’m just going to record myself getting ready. (Rhett and Link)

Here, Mourey expresses frustration because she was required to dress up as a hot commodity in order to make money. In “How to Trick People” Mourey speaks back to this system by repurposing what she later calls her “hot girl disguise” (“How to Get Ready”)—specifically the makeup, fake tan, and bleached blonde hair—to parody the commoditization of youthful femininity. In contrast to how the “hot girl disguise” functions in the context of go-go dancing and promotional modeling, this parodic performance allows Mourey to speak
back by making a joke of the system that requires women to “look nothing like” themselves in order to make a living (“How to Trick”). As she uses the YouTube video form, Mourey is empowered to choose what to show, how she can regard her viewer, and to say something about the way she looks and what her appearance means: she is empowered to use her voice to shape how her image is read and consumed. However, Mourey is still able to use the hot girl’s trading power to gain attention and an audience. In the video, she asks her viewers to see her as someone other than a hot girl who exists only to be passively consumed; moreover, she does so in a way that she could not in her job as a dancer.

In short, Mourey is keenly aware of the cultural habit of shaming girls and women who make money from their looks or sexuality, and as a result, she works to complicate her position as a go-go dancer. In the video, once her beauty regimen is complete, Mourey directs an inside joke to her audience of Facebook friends who would have been familiar with her occupation: “The next step is go out and get yourself a job that’s SUPER degrading. I picked: dancing in my underwear.” She performs a chirpy voice exaggerated to convey her sarcasm, and continues: “before I go to work I like to pump myself up by crying over my Masters Degree.” At this point, the video promptly cuts to a shot of Mourey holding her framed degree and mock-crying miserably. This is a pivotal moment in the video as Mourey highlights with expert comedic skill the realities of her situation by juxtaposing her appearance as a dancing Barbie doll with her identity as an academic high-achiever and qualified sports psychologist. We could perhaps also read into this moment her acknowledgement of the unequal playing field of professional job-seeking in which women continue to find less success than their male counterparts. It seems also to be a gesture towards the economic reality that many young people face after concluding their educations: many graduate into a professional landscape with a drastic scarcity of jobs and high levels of student debt. It is, as Mourey indicates here, a miserable situation.

At the same time that Mourey is asking viewers to read her as attractive or sexy, she’s also forcing them to consider what other factors make up her identity. She may look like a “streetwalker” (“How to Trick”), but she is also smart enough to hold a Masters Degree in Sports Psychology. She is funny and self-mocking, but in some contexts she might also be read as a nerd who wears glasses and a retainer. The video also shows that Mourey is a multi-dimensional and complex young woman who plays sports and goofs around with her friends. Rather than seeking to be valued as a hot girl, Mourey uses the hot-girl identity as a performance that she takes up on occasion and at her discretion: it is an identity she can occupy, but also mock. In this way, a hot identity cannot trap her into being shamed or hated; rather, she can move in and out of this persona as she pleases. Moreover, she can use it to her
advantage to sell her self-brand and grow her audience of fans and subscribers. And she does so across her platforms for self-representation such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

CONCLUSION

As everyday people rise to celebrity through self-published automedia like YouTube videos, questions about audience, community, media technologies, and selfhood come to the fore of public conversations about self-representation. Consideration of the terms of success in such economies is vital to understanding how media conventions shape the kinds of selves that are created.

This is an environment where success and popularity are measured by views and subscribers, and where cultural negotiations play out around gender, class, race, sexuality, and a range of other intersecting identity markers. This landscape can be perilous for vulnerable and marginal subjectivities. In its location within the YouTube media landscape, Mourey’s parody in “How to Trick People” makes sense and succeeds as a funny and shareable autobiographical representation of girlhood. Further, Mourey’s parody also serves to undermine viewers’ expectations of heteronormative feminine attractiveness in this digital space, even as it uses such expectations to gain viewers. Here, the autobiographical subject in this video is shaped by the demand for digital images of young, attractive women. Within this environment, girl vloggers must construct their automedial selves accordingly if they hope to reach an audience. This demand is connected to broader cultural imperatives for girls to be and feel beautiful, which in part drives the market for authentic beauty tutorials.9 In her negotiation of hotness, Jenna Marbles offers an answer to a question that young female content producers (and, possibly, many young women more broadly) are forced to ask themselves: How do I negotiate a system that insists on buying me as an object, while maintaining my autonomy as a subject? Her strategy is to offer a range of self-representations that are sometimes contradictory (like the nerdy retainer girl, the Masters Degree scholar, and the hot bimbo in this clip), but which are pulled together under the Jenna Marbles brand. These competing representations work to speak back to and interrupt dominant narratives of girlhood in digital spaces and beyond.

NOTES

1. Rather than defining girlhood as located within a specific age bracket, in this essay I understand girlhood as an inclusive, elastic, and diverse term. “Girl” here broadly denotes a gendered identity that signifies both youth and femininity (although not necessarily femaleness) as distinct from mature womanhood. This understanding of the term acknowledges the crucial role of cultural and historical contexts in defining the limits
and meanings of youthful femininity. For a comprehensive discussion of girlhood as a cultural construct, see Driscoll, particularly pages 1–10.

2. The forthcoming special issue of Biography on “Online Lives 2.0” (ed. Laurie McNeill and John Zuern) both attests and responds to this need within the field.

3. See “Iggy Azalea Inspired Makeup Tutorial” by YouTube beauty vlogger Lauren Curtis for an exemplary beauty tutorial. In it, Curtis replicates (on herself) the hair and makeup style of popular hip-hop artist Azalea while giving how-to instructions, tips on application and technique, and details about each cosmetic product used in the video.

4. I use Bruns’s useful term throughout this essay to describe the users of YouTube, who are positioned by the site as potentially able to create, consume, and distribute the website’s content.

5. See Lisa Nakamura’s essay “Cyberrace” for a discussion of the illusory nature of an egalitarian cyberspace.

6. See Grossman for an example of this discourse.

7. For up-to-date YouTube usage statistics, see Social Blade.

8. These are both colloquial terms used to describe those who are deemed by their communities to use their self-representations (visual or otherwise) to harvest attention on social media.

9. Although some, such as Julia Tulloh on the literary blog Killings, have successfully argued that beauty blogging is, in fact, a subversive genre that works to diversify and recontextualize the project of feminine beauty, there is currently not enough evidence to reach a sound conclusion here.

WORKS CITED


