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Reflection on Group Presentation

The topic our group was responsible for presenting was Digital Visuality and Visibility. When our group initially met to discuss the topics we chose to cover in the annotated resource assignment, we found that while our topics were similar they covered a range of different types of digital media that allowed for a diverse presentation. Keyshla and Bronwyn both focused their research on the anatomy and social effects of memes, Cara focused her research on the harmful effects Instagram has on youth self-perception, and I focused my research on the celebrity system and advertising policies of YouTube. Even though we all had similar overall themes regarding our sources from the annotated resource assignment, we chose to divide it into those three topics in order to showcase the diversity present in a topic like digital visibility. Self-expression and public presentation comes in many forms, particularly within the various types of social media that people utilize. I will briefly touch on my group members' topics before delving into my experience researching and presenting on my topic.

The first topic we presented was meme culture, which was split into two distinct subtopics. Bronwyn focused her research on the development and evolution of memes. Additionally, she spoke about how memes became a form of relatable self-expression and even communication between certain in-groups who create memes as a way of sharing an inside joke. Memes grew in popularity so much that companies, in an attempt to appear relatable to the public, began participating in meme creation as a means of bolstering their relevance, popularity,

and Internet virality. Keyshla then shifted the focus by presenting on how the social interaction generated by interacting with memes can take a negative turn, specifically if people create mean-spirited memes or memes that bash or make fun of others. Because memes are frequently defended under the guise that they are mere jokes not to be taken seriously, many times people disregard the emotional impact they can have on the subject of a meme. Some popular memes evolve from a singular photo or a person, like Alex from Target (the meme mentioned by Keyshla in our presentation). Often times the negative effects that stem from the fame brought about by being memed are disregarded for the sake of being able to laugh at a joke without feeling guilty for the subject of the joke. Additionally, Keyshla touched on a particular genre of meme: political memes. Memes are a fun way to express political views while simultaneously bashing others who do not share them, which most of the time turns aggressive and argumentative. The take home point of the meme section of our presentation was that memes, as light-hearted as they can be, can have larger, more lasting negative impacts regarding the types of social interaction they generate.

I also touched on memes briefly in my part of the presentation and within my initial research because memes are a significant part of YouTube culture. Some examples of this are things like Pewdiepie's video series "Meme Review," jacksfilms' two video series "YIAY" (Yesterday I Asked You) and "Your Grammar Sucks", or Jenna Marbles' "Reacting To Compilation Videos of Me" and "Reading Mean Comments About My Dogs" video series. Comedy YouTubers love reacting to meme content their fans create, and often times memes are created (outside of their control) out of comedic moments within their videos. It generates an enormous amount of YouTube content that is consistent, hilarious, and often genuinely relatable. Even YouTubers whose content has nothing to do with comedy or memes see their content

“memed” (which I will and frequently do use as a verb). An example of this is the memes stemming from the frequent drama that arises from the beauty YouTube community.

Moving away from memes, next in our presentation was my topic of YouTube culture. I also split my topic into two main subtopics: YouTube “celebrities” and the flawed YouTube advertising system. I likened YouTube content to memes in that both are digital content enjoyed by a target audience, an audience that is very loyal to the creators that they follow. My YouTube Rewind activity was meant to demonstrate how YouTube culture combines with and is almost equated with mainstream culture, despite the fact that YouTube celebrities are not treated equally compared to mainstream celebrities, both by the general public and by YouTube itself. That acted as a segway to the broken system that is YouTube’s advertising system, which in recent years has revealed to be so flawed that it became the phenomenon known as the Adpocalypse. The Adpocalypse made it apparent that YouTube’s algorithm was not good at equally enforcing their demonetization policies and was very clearly created to favor larger, popular creators. This clear dysfunction made it necessary for smaller YouTubers who are disproportionately affected by YouTube’s system to take sponsorships to continue creating content, which is seen by many viewers as “selling out.” Often times those sponsorships are not even genuine, which says a lot about how distrustful current advertising practices are.

The last topic in our presentation was on Instagram and its effects on mental health, as covered by Cara. Instagram has algorithm issues like YouTube does, how not quite in the same way. Instagram’s algorithm sets a lot of standards for its users that must be met in order to garner likes, and through that, visibility. Instagram is solely about visibility, because all that is posted on Instagram are photos and sometimes short videos. It is all about image and how you present yourself, which makes the likes system a dangerous one in which the likes can eventually

be equated to self-worth. Instagram models, who have become a category of celebrities in its own right, blur the line between reality and fantasy, especially with Photoshopped and doctored photos displaying ideal bodies to hungry consumers who see those celebrities as ‘goals’ to aspire to. Those goals can be very dangerous to impressionable youth who compare their own bodies to that of what they see, which leads to a multitude of mental health issues. Both women and men experience negative effects on their mental health, especially resulting from the Instagram accounts dedicated to fitness. Fitness channels toe the line between inspirational and enviable, but the line between those two is very blurry. Overall, Instagram is one of the most dangerous social media websites due to its emphasis on image and generally does more harm than good since its most lucrative content is centered on unrealistic models who also happen to have the same issues as YouTubers with deceptive advertising. What we hoped that the class took away from our presentation and subsequent discussion groups is that social media has an iron grip on our generation that are strictly tied to certain social norms while at the same time allow people platforms to be unique and different. There are various positive and negative attributes about social media and digital visibility in general, but users also need to proceed with caution and retain a healthy amount of skepticism about the content being pushed forth by these social media websites in order to maintain a sense of control over our self-esteem and the influence that advertisers have through social media.

I really enjoyed researching my topic because I learned much about the inherent differences in the types of hardships faced by YouTube celebrities compared to mainstream celebrities. The very existence of being a YouTuber as a career, particularly for smaller creators, is very telling about what advertising companies think will sell their products and what they will do in order to sell them. Popular YouTuber Safiya Nygaard exposed the sponsorship practices of

many companies who reach out to YouTubers in her video titled, “Trying Products That Asked To Sponsor Me (Not Sponsored).” The video showed how smaller companies frequently “cold call” YouTubers via emails that sound very generic and not personal to the YouTuber they are emailing. That along with the long list of YouTubers that the emails are sent to indicates that companies view sponsorships like fishing, hoping that one of the YouTubers they email will take the bait. I did not cover sponsorships very in depth during the presentation, however they are a major part of what I believe to be the future implications for YouTube and its content. Though there is no reliable way to know the intent behind companies who offer sponsorships for videos, I would venture to guess that companies take advantage of the difficulty of surviving on YouTube by offering fancy lucrative sponsorships in exchange for a review or a comment about their product that may not even be true. Unfortunately, we also have no reliable way of determining which YouTubers we trust to tell the truth when reviewing a product or service; it ultimately comes down to a gut feeling or a trust developed via a stable history of consuming a YouTuber’s content. This gamble that we make when considering who to trust is especially important for makeup enthusiasts who frequently spend money on products they might have been influenced to purchase. It is a bit easier to look past sponsorships like BetterHelp.com or Wix because those are services targeted for a very specific audience with very specific needs. Not everyone needs an online therapist or a website domain. However, when you’re a beauty influencer with thousands if not millions of pairs of eyes watching you review a singular product, the effect of purchase is much greater with, in a way, more at stake, especially if it is an expensive or luxury product. While sponsorships and professionally generated content is not going away any time soon, hopefully in the future YouTube can modify its algorithm to not be so

exclusionary to smaller YouTubers and increase the fair flow of views and monetization that deserving YouTubers are just not seeing yet.