**Public Diaries, Personal Connection: Building Microcelebrity
and Community through Lifestreaming**

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Abstract

Social media today exists as a network of lifestreams. As internet users, we are all near-constantly engaged in the process of presenting lifestreams as well as consuming them. The convergence of lifestreaming into user-generated content has brought about the promise of digital celebrity, and as a developing sector of new media, requires study and understanding. This thesis longitudinally studies the evolution of lifestreaming through the lifestreams of b/vlogger Rachel Nguyen while theorizing on dimensions of connection brought through digital self-presentation. The analysis of Nguyen exemplifies the formation and growth of microcelebrity and helps understand celebrity-audience relations in the digital age. Nguyen's blog posts and vlogs are analyzed netnographically alongside user responses and comments. Building on existing research in internet and celebrity studies, this longitudinal, netnographic analysis aims to highlight the role of audience perception in the making of contemporary celebrity.

       Keywords: Audience, lifestreaming, microcelebrity, community, intimacy, self-presentation, Rachel Nguyen

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Introduction

In the 21st century, our lives are enveloped by and interwoven with the internet. Over the last 25 years, novel forms of relating to the world around us have emerged, delivered through increasingly thinning metal boxes called computers with the magical powers of this thing called the internet. Through the internet, I have learned almost everything I know; I have stayed in touch with my friends; and I've kept a meticulous record of my life. Through my mom's Facebook account (which has been active since 2006), old emails with friends from middle school, my brother's now defunct YouTube channel, my Instagram account made at the start of high school, and the many subsequent Twitter accounts I've had, the entire history of my life exists online. As creatures of the internet, we are at once both public and private beings, always leading both public and private lives. Publicizing the personal and personalizing the public enables a wide ground to build connections and community online. At the same time, the existence of social media as networked windows into each other's lives creates a need to perform and present a curated self, somewhere between the public and the private.

Performing the self in the vast digital space allows for self-presentation to be audienced– that is to gain an audience and also be influenced by it. While for something to be 'audienced' can just mean for something to be with an audience, moving forward, I will apply John Fiske's definition of the term 'audiencing.' Fiske coined the term 'audiencing' in 1992 in the context of television to define the audience group of a specific television show (the media text) as a social formation to whom the text is catered (Fiske 350). In this 'catering,' the audience both responds favorably to the text while also "effecting" the text (Fiske 358). He says, "a text is no more nor no less an effect of the audience than is the audience of the text" (Fiske 358). In such a dynamic, we see a reciprocal relationship between audience and text, each influencing and shaping the formation and relevance of the other. Unlike the traditional media of Fiske's time, within the contemporary context of 'lifestreaming' in the form of vlogging, blogging, microblogging and photo-sharing, reciprocality exists extendedly between the text (the lifestreams), the audience, and the lifestreamer, who, by virtue of self-commodification, is in themself a text of sorts. Digital documentations of the self serve a dual purpose of documentation for the self but also for the public, which starts off being just for *a* general public and, in the cultivation of resonance, finds itself a digital intimate public of its own. This documentation and self-presentation is broadly what is categorized as 'lifestreaming,' following Alice Marwick's description of it as "the ongoing sharing of personal information to a networked audience" ("Status Update"

208). A lifestreamer gains traction and (possibly) popularity if they are able to continually resonate with their digital intimate public and keep feeding them content. In such a case, an ordinary internet user transforms into a microcelebrity. Microcelebrity is defined by Theresa M Senft as the presentation of self as a branded good ("Microcelebrity and the Branded Self" 346). The *proximatization* to fame enabled by the democracy of the digital medium puts us in a constant flux between simply existing online and existing online in anticipation of gaining traction (Heriyati 167). In feeding their digital intimate public with sustained self-projection, the lifestreamer gains an audience to whom they are now a celebrity. This process of self-celebrification is not just in the sense of becoming a celebrity but more so in how they view and present themselves, through which I argue they consequently become a celebrity in the eyes of their audience (Heriyati 167-168). It is done through consistent self-branding and professionalized presentation (McRae 20; Kim; Hou). I argue in this thesis that managing internet-found fame with using the internet as a medium of self-expression is a constant process of negotiating the public and private selves.

I further argue that digital fame relies on the connection lifestreamers build with their audience I do so by breaking down the process of digital self-presentation and audiencing in the digital context by using YouTuber Rachel Nguyen as my case study to examine the journey that internet fame can take– from using forms of lifestreaming realistically to gaining a audience of readers/viewers to developing a loyal following and further monetizing lifestream content. In Nguyen's case, her journey involves becoming popular as a young, self-made fashion blogger, to running a YouTube channel for a decade, to experiencing a reluctance to be a public persona, and then further (literally) commodifying her content creation skills to market to her audience who aspire to be like her. In exploring these various facets of Nguyen's online public-private existence, I aim to break down the process of audiencing in the digital context to show the intentional additions that must be made to one's self-presentation beyond mere digital existence and how that necessitates a negotiation of the self. In doing so, I wish to view Nguyen primarily as an internet user and a digital creator rather than as an "influencer" per se, who seems to have done the right things (at the right time) in the right ways, and through having a like-minded community, has been able to gain fame and money through what she does. Her case displays a great example of sustained audiencing that is heralded through community building. I ground the idea of digital communities in Akane Kanai's conceptualization of 'digital intimate publics', further specifying Nguyen's digital intimate public as a 'digital intimate public of the vlogosphere' where she exists at and as the center of the community ("Girlfriendship and Sameness" 294).

Intimacy, as the backbone of building community, in its many forms, is seen here as the driving force of digital fame. Intimacy, in this case, is something that is cultivated through sustained self-presentation and its reception with feelings of resonance. Socially, resonance simply is the connectivity felt towards something or someone. It can be felt through relatability and also a general lack of alienation ("Gender and Relatability" 185; "The Idea of Resonance as a Sociological Concept"). Resonance takes the idea of connection or relatability a step further by alluding to a mutually felt connection and reciprocality. To expand on the functioning of this digital intimate public, I use the notion of (digital) intimacy as genre, capital, and, additionally, also as labor (Raun 100; Dobson et al 10-12). Intimacy as genre is used as an evocative force, as capital it acts as a device to monetize content, and as labor it is something that must be performed and enforced (Raun 100; Dobson et al 10-12). Thus, digital intimacy is seen as a force of connection, a thing to be sold (even if just figuratively), a thing through which to sell, and something that must be nourished and nurtured, all at once. These varying roles and functions all work interdependently and in support of each other, as will be elaborated through examples of how intimacy is built and sustained within Nguyen's digital public.

Intimacy is established through sustained self-projection, or regular, periodic posting, as well as the authentic representation of herself by showing her "backstage" self. Richard Dyer's conceptualization of authenticity as private and unpremeditated ties perfectly with Erving Goffman's concept of the backstage as the realm of familiar, informal expression disconnected from the formal representation of the self (Dyer 31-32; Goffman 78). The internet's omnoptic nature keeps internet users in anticipation of being monitored and thus in a state of self-monitoring, which leads to deliberately formed public-private presentation (Ellaway 548; Bey; *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture* 159; Marshall 44). A public-private self on display can also form community within their audience through relatable presentation and the expression of reciprocity with them, often done through the sharing of "negative affect" (*Gender and Relatability* 3-4; Goffman 78; "Crying on YouTube" 87). Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka define negative affect as the "performance of emotional vulnerability," which, I argue, makes room for relatability and reciprocal sharing ("Crying on YouTube" 87, 90). Relatability and vulnerability can also manifest in ways of simulating close real-life relationships ("I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend" 3).

On the flip side, constant connectivity with the internet, especially in the hyperconnective post-COVID years, has led to burnout and stands as an effect of social

acceleration ("High-speed Society" 11, 26; Kania-Lundholm 14). This calls for a deceleration through digital content by way of the slow content creation movement, or the less-rapid production of content that is timeless and intentionally produced (Tam 213). Nguyen makes for an interesting case study to study the evolution of content creation as she has, especially in recent years, grown bitter towards the accelerated expectation of content creation (*i want to own my content*). Despite (or perhaps because of) having spent a majority of her life as a content creator and lifestreamer, she has spoken against and stepped back from content creation (Adasi). In the last few years, she has pulled back from YouTube and even her LA lifestyle, expressing that after spending a majority of her life creating content on the internet, she feels a lack of agency and burnout from constant performance (*I Want to Own My Content*). She embodies the tension between connection and disconnection felt in lifestreaming– wanting to connect through the internet but, over a period of time, feeling the need to disconnect. In the evolution of her online existence, we can trace a reluctance in participating in fame where she expresses rather that "[she wants] to be in the crowd with everyone" (Brown). Beyond being interactive in replying to comments, she has attempted to genuinely connect with her followers by creating a Slack group called Warde, described as a digital community space of like-minded creatives (Brooks; Lindsay). Nguyen's content as a lifestyle vlogger has an aesthetically curated quality to it. Her videos depict her life in Los Angeles, documentations of her travels, and often also lookbooks and simple skincare and makeup tutorials. Her online persona is deeply introspective and focused on self-growth, sustainable living, and spiritualism. Having started out as a blogger in the late 2000s, her digital self-presentation precedes her 10-year career on YouTube. In the close to twenty years of being a digital creator, she has cultivated a digital community, amassed 196K subscribers and 127K Instagram followers ("Rachel Nguyen;" "thatschic").

I will perform my analysis of Nguyen through netnography, by ethnographically observing her blog, her vlogs, and her digital communities (Kozinets). I use the *Internet Archive* to access her old blog, *That's Chic,* where I have gone through her periodic entries from her earlier years to select blog posts with either a strong display of personal branding or heavy traction in terms of comments. For her vlogs, I have watched close to all her videos but specifically chosen her vlogmas videos as they elicit one of the first signs of her expression of backstage behavior. The other vlogs chosen for analysis are due to their explicit display of relevant subject matter (i.e., vulnerability, digital disconnection, *Warde*). The blog posts and vlogs have been cited according to MLA 9th edition guidelines– with quotation marks indicating the blog titles or month of posting for the blogs and vlog titles in italics for the

videos, as all the analyzed content has the same author (*MLA Simplified*). The comments sections of her blogs and vlogs are an essential part of understanding the reception to her content as well as connective practices within her community; they are cited using the names of their respective blogs/vlogs, and all commenters are anonymized to maintain privacy. My chapters merge textual analysis of the above-mentioned media objects with theoretical understanding to present a cohesive analysis.

In this thesis, I address the question: How does lifestreaming facilitate the formation of microcelebrity and aid the creation of digital community between lifestreamer and audience?

The first chapter, situated within viewing the internet as a participatory omnopticon, charts the congruent evolution of lifestreaming and Nguyen's growth as a content creator while examining the performance of self-celebrification through the maintenance of a personal brand and increasing professionalization on her blog, *That's Chic*. The second chapter focuses on her shift to YouTube and the building of intimacy through sustained, authentic self-presentation. In it, I analyze Nguyen's performance of the backstage and sisterly self for an audience as a mode of deepening connection. Lastly, in the third chapter, I present Nguyen's unique approach to co-creative community formation as an opposition to the rapid-commercialization of content creation and digital disconnection. Ultimately, this thesis aims to study celebrity and audience practices in the digital age in relation to lifestreaming and contribute to existing literature on the same with the addition of a post-COVID perspective.

Chapter 1: *That's Chic* and the Making of Microcelebrity through Lifestreaming

Our digital existence in the Web 2.0 world is one of constant surveillance, whether by tech superpowers or by other internet onlookers. Built on the principles of access and participation, Web 2.0 allows digital citizens– regular internet users– to perceive others and be perceived themselves, engaging in "participatory surveillance" (Valtysson 202; *Are You a Digital Citizen?*; Mossberger et al.; Albrechtslund). The *social* nature of social media transforms digital monitoring from a merely centrally controlled panopticon to participatory, omnoptic surveillance. An omnopticon is a model of surveillance in which many observe the many as opposed to the panoptic observation of many by an unobserved few (Ellaway 548; Jensen). Our virtually eternal digital presence has resulted in an ever-existent social omnopticon, normalizing awareness of constant surveillance and self-monitoring in anticipation of it (Bey; *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture* 159; Andrejevic 74). The anticipation of persistent gaze calls for the performance of the self as "a conscious act of the individual [requiring] careful staging to maintain the self" (Marshall 39). In the process of performing the self for a public, Web 2.0 enables digital citizens to transform into microcelebrities (Marshall 40; "Microcelebrity and the branded self" 349). Ordinary internet users gain traction by presenting a "distinguishable and consistent self-brand" in forms of self-expressive user-generated content (UGC) or lifestreaming, like blogging and vlogging (McRae 20). Lifestreaming as content has *celebrified* once-ordinary internet users like Rachel Nguyen, who gained internet fame through her old blog, *That's Chic,* and has since transformed into a microcelebrity. In this chapter, I present the evolution of lifestreaming, followed by the evolution of Nguyen's self-presentation on *That's Chic,* to argue that continual presentation of self-brand leads to the creation and growth of an audience.

1.1 The Evolution of Lifestreaming and Self-Celebrification

The internet as we know it today is a network of lifestreams. Conceptualized in 1996, a few years into Web 1.0 and the invention of the World Wide Web, "lifestreaming" was originally defined by computer scientists Eric Freeman and David Gelernter as a "diary of your electronic life" (Fertig et al.; "Lifestreams Project Homepage"). What was conceived as a document management software project gained real-world relevance as internet use became increasingly common and the internet as a space became a technology of the self (Bakardjieva and Gaden 400). Adopting the Foucauldian idea, Bakardjieva and Gaden equate Web 2.0 to "technologies of the self" owing to its nature as a space for networked

self-presentation and expression, going beyond the mere informational or communicative purpose of Web 1.0 (400, 403, 407). As internet access and computer ownership became more widespread through the 2000s and 2010s, digital documentation and presentation of life became progressively mainstream, emphasizing the internet's connective nature (Fuchs 135, 137). The emergence of social media in the early 2000s, starting with websites like *LiveJournal*, *Friendster*, *MySpace*, and *Facebook*, enabled people to document and share their lives while also interacting with those of others (Coskun 687; Fuchs 135, 137). With this, the digital space started evolving into the aforementioned network of lifestreams. This turned the web into a highly participatory space while also mediatizing social interaction and self-presentation (Bakardjieva and Gaden 410; Marshall 42; Koch and Miles 1380; *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture* 4). Theresa Senft described this digital, mediated existence as presenting ourselves through, being experienced as, and experiencing ourselves as media ("Micro-Celebrity"). The mediated self necessitates curated self-presentation that maintains a balance between authentic individuality and more polished presentability: a "private self for public presentation"(Vainikka et al. 120-121; Marshall 44).

With this turn, gradually, lifestreaming came to be defined, as Alice Marwick described it, as "the ongoing sharing of personal information to a networked audience" (*Status Update* 208). Drawing from Fiske's work on television audiences, I distinguish "audience" from the internet's general public by defining an audience as the specific and targeted group with whom media, in this case, someone's lifestream, resonates (46-47). Further, a networked audience is an audience which, unlike old media audiences, exists interconnectedly and is able to directly interact with the the creator/s of the content they consume (Willment 1423). The novel affordances of Web 2.0, centering user-generated content and online interactivity, enabled people not only to share every aspect of their lives but to share it as content to be consumed ("Crying on YouTube" 88; "Microcelebrity and the branded self" 349). "Demanding the right to participate within the culture" , internet users became 'produsers' (or prosumers), with the responsibility to both produce and consume information and content on the internet (Jenkins 24; Cammaerts 362; Fuchs 141). In the process of prosumption, internet users began practicing self-commodification by performing the self for an audience, consequently embodying 'microcelebrity' by maintaining a close connection with their audience (Raun 100; "Microcelebrity and the Branded Self"; *Camgirls* 26). Senft, who coined the term microcelebrity, defined it as "a commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good" ("Microcelebrity and the Branded Self" 346). In presenting the self as microcelebrity, the line between the mediated

self and the commodified self blurred over time, and so did the line between audience and performer.

1.1.1 Forms of Lifestreaming

The earliest form of lifestream content was blogging. Blogs, short for 'web logs,' had been around since the 1990s, although initially hosted individually and often by people who were very technologically adept: think software engineers with a knack for writing, creatives who liked to code (Gunn; Highfield 2). Described by Katarina Vuković as a simultaneous "message to the world" and "note to self," blogs were like digital diaries, meant to be shared with an audience, containing short (to mid-sized) entries detailing one's life events and other thoughts they wanted to share (Vuković 224; Tobias 11). One of the first prominent blogs is considered to be Justin Hall's *Justin's Links*, which appeared in 1994 (*"links.net"*). Hall started the website to share his life with friends amid this new elusive World Wide Web, and his fascination with it is evident in the early iterations of his blog. He also shared interesting links to other websites, which became a typical characteristic of blogs and reflected the interconnected nature of Web 2.0 (Cammaerts 366; Highfield 2-3). Platforms like *OpenDiary*, *LiveJournal*, and *Blogger* were launched in the late 1990s (1998-1999), making the process of blogging more accessible, followed by their monetization in the early 2000s, through services like BlogAds (Gunn).

Simultaneously, visual media like photos and videos were integrated into blogs, such as when, in January of 2000, Blogger Adam Kontras incidentally released the first ever video blog (vlog)– a 14-second video attachment of him sneaking his cat, J-Dog, into a 'no pets allowed' hotel– on his blog *Adam Kontras.com* (fig. 1) (Clarkson 10; "Talk about moving in the 21st Century…").

Fig. 1. *Entry #1 - Talk about Moving in the 21st Century (World's First Video Blog)*.
Re-uploaded by Adam Kontras, 2008. *YouTube*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Op65qkWxqBY.

This "vlog" is rather simple and primitive compared to what we see as vlogs today. The 14-second-long video very briefly shows Kontras carrying his cat in a hotel hallway into an elevator while saying, "There's gotta be cameras here, *haha*." With no real 'content' or established narrative as such, this stands as a vlog only in the sense that it is a video web log. Interestingly, Kontras himself notes in the video's description, under the later *YouTube* upload of the vlog, that the short videos he uploaded at the time "make no sense without reading [the accompanying] entry" ("Talk about moving in the 21st Century…"). Kontras's 'vlogs' thus act merely as the visual accompaniment to the narrative he presents in his blog entries, which themselves are quite detailed and personal compared to his vlogs. In a comment reply, Kontras clarifies what makes a vlog a vlog by saying, "…vlog = web video log. Simply a documentation of videos posted online. That's why it doesn't just mean filming yourself with a camera." ("Talk about moving in the 21st Century…"). By this definition, a vlog is broadly any self-documented, usually self-recorded, video that is posted online where the vlogger is in some form engaging directly with the camera and by extension the audience– a video blog or "a blog containing video materials." (Wang and Chang 66; see also Molyneaux 2, Yalin 2, Highfield 4).

In this definition, vlogging finds its primitive cousins in camming and lifecasting. The genre of visual spectatorship into the lives of strangers on the internet originated through camming, pioneered by Jennifer Ringley, who set up a webcam in her dorm room in 1996 to upload snapshots of her daily life onto the internet throughout the day on a website called *JenniCam* (Ruberg 32). As Ringley's intention was to present an unfiltered view into her life,

it included pictures of her engaging in sexual acts, which generated the interest of an unintended audience (*Camgirls*; Bleakley 895). By the next year, the heavy traffic of millions of people onto her site for this reason led her to set up a separate paid section of her website, allowing her to monetize from this stream; camming then went on to become of practice of online sexual spectatorship (Bleakley 895; Banet-Weiser). About a decade later, in early 2007, Justin Kan began broadcasting 24 hours of his life online on *Justin.tv*, which went on to become the livestreaming site Twitch (Montano 1). He did so with a webcam attached to his head that could record his life both in and outside the house, documenting every activity and interaction of his day. Subsequent to Kan's *Justin.tv* came many more lifecasters, some backed by Kan himself and others arising independently (Guynn). This mobile form of lifecasting took the stationary, bedroom model of visual lifestreaming outside the limited environment of the private indoors– required by the nature of camming– and generated a separate hybrid public-private spectatorship of a public-private self (Yang; Marshall 44-45). *Justin.tv* popularized 'DIY (do-it-yourself) broadcasting' which aided in the exceptional reception of YouTube, which went on to become the de facto home for vlogs (Bruns 88).

1.2 YouTube, the Rise of UGC and Self-Capitalization

YouTube was launched in 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim as a platform to upload videos, which soon became a space where people could upload their own content (Jarett 132-133). Early *YouTube* uploads mostly consisted of bite-sized home videos and home-video style amateur footage, perhaps owing to the first video uploaded on the platform, co-founder Karim's own 19 second-long "Me at the zoo;" in the video, Karim is seen standing at a zoo in front of some elephants and he simply says "All right, so here we are, in front of the elephants. The cool thing about these guys is that they have really... really, really long trunks, and that's cool. And that's pretty much all there is to say." (*Me at the Zoo*). This homegrown spirit was visible through *YouTube*'s old slogan, "Broadcast Yourself," which directly promoted 'DIY broadcasting' (Jarrett 133). It started a wave of professional-amateur content creators, who democratically took up digital self-presentation, mirroring traditional broadcasting through UGC (Hou 538; Raun 101; Kim 58).

Within a year, the site grew rapidly and had 65,000 daily uploads and 100 million monthly streams, and that year, it was acquired by the behemoth tech institution Google for $1.6 billion (Jarett 132; van Dijck 42). This change in ownership announced the institutionalization of *YouTube* as Google altered the platform to consolidate its broader

commercial attributes with UGC, moving away from a content focus to "the vertical integration of search engines with content, social networking and advertising" (van Dijck 42). Jin Kim defines institutionalization as the structuring and commercialization of what was previously primarily user-generated content produced out of user interest; this also includes the professionalization of content, shifting gears from amateur production standards to content that incorporated advertisements and sponsorships and became subjectable to copyright claims (54,65). Along the same lines, the institutionalization of user-generated content also marked the establishment of conglomerate-owned platforms as the hubs of hosting and consuming UGC. This period of change simultaneously but contradictorily democratized blogging and also institutionalized it.

Commercial consolidation of the platform enabled the capitalization of self-presentation, through the literal monetization of lifestreaming (Hou 535; Raun 100). At this point, b/vloggers realized the potential of lifestreaming for a specific audience rather than just releasing content for a general public and into the *void* of the internet. Tailored content was supplemented by tailored advertising, resulting in revenue generated for the lifestreamers and the platform while also benefiting the viewer in the form of content they resonated with (Jarrett 133). While much of the content uploaded on *YouTube* remains amateur, owing to its accessible and democratic nature, this shift of its institutionalization paved the way for the increasing professionalization of UGC, especially driven by the hopes of fame and monetization through an extended audience (Aran et al. 201; Hou 534-535). I will now take the example of b/vlogger Rachel Nguyen and examine her techniques of self-professionalization alongside sustained self-branding, seen through her evolution as a digital creator on her old blog. I argue that this branded self-performance and its positive reception by an audience over time cements her as a microcelebrity.

1.3 From Amateur Blogger to Professional Microcelebrity: Branding *That's Chic*

Rachel Nguyen is a lifestyle vlogger who has been creating content through lifestreaming for the last two decades (Blitzer). Having spent over half her life as a digital creator, her audience increased alongside the rise of the produser economy and UGC. As she started out very young and with limited resources, Nguyen is exemplary of the process of an ordinary internet user going from an amateur blogger to a professional by understanding the digital landscape and developing her personal brand. Her blog has gained an ever larger audience as a result, eventually leading her to approach other avenues, including her *YouTube* channel. Nguyen

started her internet journey with a fashion blog, *That's Chic*, hosted on *Blogger*. She launched *That's Chic* in 2007 as a high schooler living under her parents' roof (Brown; "Meet Rachel Nguyen"). She ran the blog until 2023, when it was taken down by Nguyen, but can still be accessed on the *Internet Archive* (Tan and Otieno).

The blog began with Nguyen as a "knowing but unknown" writer ("Girlfriendship and Sameness" 293). She developed her image as a high schooler who is into fashion, existing among a sea of other bloggers who are doing the same thing; linked in some of her posts and in comment sections, we see other high schoolers interested in fashion doing similar things to her ("October 2007"). On *Blogger*, Nguyen was among many other bloggers who interacted with her blogs as she would with theirs. It was a democratic space that made creation and publication accessible. Whether famous or not, the majority of members of this larger community were digital creators and lifestreamers in their own right. By building a strong self-brand, along with her relatable voice, eye for good aesthetics, and skilled writing, Nguyen distinguished herself in this sea of bloggers and grew in popularity.

With strict parents, her blog was her mode of self-expression and freedom in this new and intriguing digital space (Brooks). It included periodic entries (anywhere between 2-12 each month) focused mainly on fashion and her life as a teenager, which were formatted as well-written, chatty, diary-like posts addressed to the public and accompanied by pictures ("ARCHIVE"). She describes early on that this was a diaristic venture for her, which also helped with creative self-expression. In a 2008 blog post, she said, "… each [post is] loosely connected to personal memories at the time written. Indeed, these posts conjure a narrative awash of fashion, but reading through them, I am also inclined to remember the tears of a breakup, a glee through a hard day's work paid off, or even something as simple as an unexpected thank you to inspire a post." ("The One Year Anniversary"). Through this, we see her dual utilization of this blog, where on one hand her posts are centered around fashion and for the consumption of the public; on the other, they are connected to and inspired by her personal life (Vuković 224).

Even as a fashion blogger, she displays the tension that must be navigated between the public and private. While from the start, her posts included a lot of information about her personal life, including school, work, friends, and her relationship, she rarely posted photos of herself ("July 2007;" "September 2007"). Or, even if she did post photos of her own outfits, she cropped out her face, perhaps owing to the fact that she was still young and her parents were strict (fig. 2). Instead, collages were a large part of her distinct visual style and the aesthetic that her blog cultivated, giving the feel of homemade magazine cutouts. She

received many comments praising them, saying "those collages are amazing…," "Those collages are great! …," "P.P.S. I was also wondering where you learned how to make those clickable collages. I think they are so cool && I would love to learn how to make them! Thanks," "your collages are amazing ! i especially love the outcome …" ("The One Year Anniversary"). Alongside her writing on the blog, the visuals of her collages created a spectacle adored by her readers and presented something unique that sustained as well as grew her audience. The large number of specific observations about the collages by readers highlights a special quality in her style of blogging, which was personal to her, even if her own self-presentation was not on display.

1.3.2 Making *That's Chic* Unique: Creating a Personal-Public Self-Brand

As her blog grew, she began to blur the lines between the persona of *That's Chic* and her own self. Gradually bringing more and more of herself to *That's Chic*, she simultaneously established the basis to eventually start her *YouTube* channel. As the months and years went by, she posted more of herself– photos from her life, photos of herself; quite literally marking her bringing herself to public view. As she begins to post pictures of herself, posing in the fashion that she previously only coveted through her beloved collages, she makes a quick jump from presenting herself as an amateur blogger to a professional one. In 2009, two years into being a fashion blogger, she displayed a visible shift in her visual presentation. Three photos (fig. 2, 3, 4) in particular show her transition to spending more time in front of the camera and gaining confidence in her visual self-presentation while developing a more professional quality. Fig. 2, from 2008, is an anonymized photograph showcasing a rather simple and unaccessorized outfit – simple grey monochromatic loungewear with knee-high black Roman sandals – against the background of an indoor corridor. By contrast, in fig. 3, from January 2009, when she first began posting her own photos on the blog, we see Nguyen in her entirety, wearing a red dress with a black leather jacket, black boots, and a belt. While this photo identifies her, Rachel Nguyen, the writer behind this blog, it is seemingly taken on a webcam, or an equivalent amateur camera, visible by the quality of the photo and poor lighting. Only one month later, in February 2009 (fig. 4), the quality of her photo has rapidly improved and looks like a photo from an editorial photoshoot. She is seen in a black top and jeans with a blazer, glasses, and a bag kept on the side, against a plain, outdoor backdrop with high-contrast lighting. While the first two photos (fig. 2, 3) seem like they could have been taken on personal devices, the last one (fig. 4) looks like it was taken with a professional

camera. This simple evolution of photos embodies her shift from ordinary blogger to digital creator and budding microcelebrity. In the course of sustained posting over the years, she begins to understand how to maintain a consistent self-brand while improving her self-presentation to be more polished (McRae 20).

Fig. 2. Nguyen, Rachel. "The Girl Scout Cookie." *That's Chic*, 27 Feb. 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20231123010939/https://thatschic.blogspot.com/2008/02/girl-scout-cookie.html.
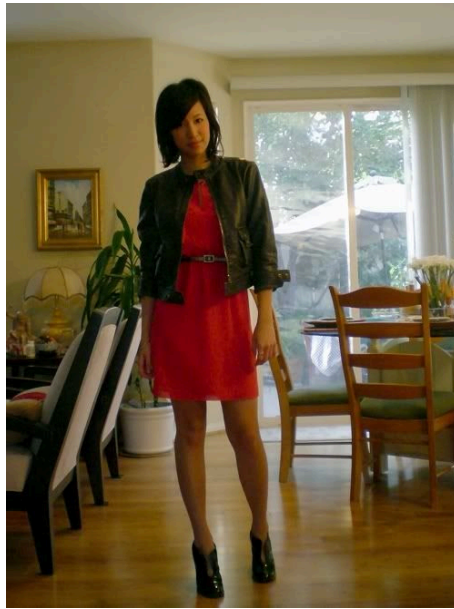
Fig. 3. Nguyen, Rachel. "The Great Tastes." *That's Chic*, 5 Jan. 2009,
https://web.archive.org/web/20231123120829/https://thatschic.blogspot.com/2009/01/gre
at-tastes.html.

Fig. 4. Nguyen, Rachel. "The Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice." *That's Chic*, 28 Feb.
2009,
https://web.archive.org/web/20231123082448/https://thatschic.blogspot.com/2009/0
2/sugar-spice-and-everything-nice.html.

Through Nguyen's continuous, weekly posting, the blog gradually grew a following. While there is no exact record indicating the data on Nguyen's growth, the increase in her following can be observed through the number of comments under her blog posts as the years go by. When she started off in 2007, she received around ten comments per post ("July 2007"). In mid-2009, she received between 30 to 60 comments under her posts ("June 2009"), and by the end of 2010, three years after she started the blog, she was receiving anywhere between 50 to 100 comments under her blogs ("December 2010"). Celebrating a year of her blog, she said, "…I established this blog with no direction. I received my first comment, really not knowing how that person directed themselves to *That's Chic*, then realized the commitment I made to continuously update this blog" ("The One Year Anniversary"). Even though it started for her with just one commenter, acknowledging a presence on the other end pushed her to continue lifestreaming. Over time, *That's Chic* went from being a personal digital lifestream to a brand. The possibility of readers (and even *a* reader) kept her going. The presence of an audience converted the blog from a shot in the dark to a sustained effort at maintaining an audience.

The audience gave her a larger platform for self-expression and sent in comments that both appreciated and understood her and her work. From back-to-school to family road-trips to house parties to Valentine's posts, her blog intersected everyday life events with fashion and provided her audience well-made, relatable content (*That's Chic*). Further, it acted as inspiration for their own style as well as their blogs, indicating "a joint dynamic interplay" ("July 2007," "Affective resonance and social interaction" 1014). In the bloggers' culture of internal self-promotion, bloggers tagged themselves in the comments of Nguyen's posts and promoted her blog by adding it to their homepages under a "blogs I follow" section (fig. 5). Every so often, Nguyen would receive comments that said "you've been tagged," choosing to promote her by their own volition and reflecting her organic trajectory to fame ("The One Year Anniversary"; "YouTube Newcomer").

My blogs

testblog

fancy snaps /// The blog of San Francisco Photographer Sarah Jehan

Blogs I follow

QUEEN OF THE POSH AND BROKE

A Hole to Scream Into

Face Hunter

fade to black

I Wrote This For You

Lara Jade Photography

pandaphilia

Prom Date Boner

Rogue Collection

That's Chic

Fig. 5. *Blogger: User Profile: Sarah*. 22 Jun. 2012,
https://web.archive.org/web/20180821181808/https://www.blogger.com/profile/06980552566
551269073.

       Over the years of growing *That's Chic*, Nguyen built a following of readers interested
not only in her blog but the figure of Rachel Nguyen, which she then used to venture into a
new format of lifestreaming on *YouTube*, where she has close to 200k followers ("Rachel
Nguyen"). Her continuous commitment to posting, relatable content, and distinct style of
posting helped build a following that allowed her to do this. Continuity and resonance, which
she learned from writing her blog, sit at the center of successfully building microcelebrity
through lifestreaming. The institutionalization of UGC through platforms like *YouTube* and
Blogger made lifestreaming accessible, providing the chance to go from a regular internet
user to a digital creator with a following. The possibility of gaining an audience, fame, and
money through UGC leads to the treatment and presentation of the self as a celebrity, which
is achieved when the personal and public selves are presented in balance, and this balance
resonates with a larger public of other internet users. When the process of self-celebrification
is supplemented with an audience, an amateur UGC creator also goes through a process of
self-professionalization.

Chapter 2: Lifestyle Vlogging and the Role of Authenticity in Building Intimacy

      Over the last two decades, since the establishment and popularization of YouTube, lifestyle vlogging has gained prominence as a genre of lifestreaming. While the prototypical camming and lifecasting consisted of broadcasting unedited, real-time footage, later styles of lifestreaming like vlogging warranted editing and self-curation, allowing for highly mouldable self-presentation (Hwung; "The Public Domain" 389). Self-curation in this case comes in the form of intentional self-presentation with the purpose of presenting a certain image to her audience. Digital self-curation can be defined as the "process to reconstruct every personal detail in a certain online space," performed through decisions like keeping, leaving, and ignoring any part of yourself in its presentation (Li 29; Williams et al. 341, 351). Owing to the limited format of YouTube, unlike personal websites like *Justin.tv*, vloggers had to present shorter, more crisp glimpses into their lives, which led to the controlled, manicured characteristic of vlogs (Griffith and Papacharissi). In the struggle between public and private presentation, the edited presentation of the self allows the vlogger to choose what to share, to what degree of emotionality, with what visuals, as well as how the visuals are presented (Marshall 45). The sustained personal and visual element of vlogging allows for a more familiar, seemingly direct relationship between viewer and vlogger. And, its ultimately edited nature generates a sense of intentionality in how we're allowed to perceive a vlogger. In this chapter, I argue that curated self-presentation (as *authentic* and *raw*) generates a sense of intentional belonging, increasing the intimacy felt by the audience towards vloggers. Further, I suggest that this strengthens the deep connection felt with them and their content, and consequently contributes to steady viewership.

2.1 The Role of Video in Forming Deep Connection

On the internet, we generally exist as what Akane Kanai calls "a public of knowing but unknown readers" ("Girlfriendship and Sameness" 293). But a vlogger exists differently because we seemingly *know* them. The video format of vlogging allows for a literal look into the lives of vloggers, presented knowingly to an unknown audience, simulating proximity and closeness. This is best seen today in the sub-genre of lifestyle vlogs, where the audience has routine and continued access into a vlogger's life through visual presentations of their (daily) life (Yan 202; Jerslev 5233). Gergely defines lifestyle vlogs as a "video diary on a person's life," distinguishing it from other genres like travel, comedy, and beauty vlogs (77). Even if one-sided, it allows the audience to develop a deeper connection with them since the

audience is voluntarily let into the vlogger's personal sphere (Marshall 44-45). Under the broader umbrella of vlogs as digitally uploaded, self-documented video, lifestyle vlogs display the personal life of vloggers through routine uploads (Maden and Kalafatoğlu 11). In this sustained, personal, proximate look into a person's life, "intimacy works as a genre that can be evoked in various ways and is anticipated by the audience" (Raun 105).

  Establishing intimacy with the audience ensures a steady stream of viewership and requires the presentation of authentic self-image, blurring the lines of what can be withheld and what has to be publicized (Marshall 40). Richard Dyer, in the context of stardom, characterized authenticity as "sincere, immediate, spontaneous, real, direct, genuine," essentially pointing to the personal, private self behind the public star (26). Self-commodification as microcelebrity– performing the self for an audience– broke personal barriers (for vloggers) of keeping the private self private (Raun 100). Between displaying life as content and commodifying the self, vloggers are expected to express themselves freely and 'let in' an audience of strangers. This includes sharing (deeply) personal information and expressing vulnerable emotions, which demonstrates authenticity and openness, simulating close real-life connections ("Crying on Youtube" 87, 90; Dobson et al. 5, 8; Yalın 7). Expressing what is not meant to otherwise be shared with strangers acts as 'self-exposure,' and makes room for relatability rather than just spectatorship ("Crying on Youtube" 90; Raun 106-10; "I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend" 7). This exposure must continually be performed, for the audience, presenting a familiar life narrative for the establishment of sustained intimacy leading to deep connection felt towards lifestreamers (Penttinen et al. 563; "Girlfriendship and Sameness," 300). 'Deep connection' is the feeling of connection that arises from the combination of being allowed into what Tobias Raun calls the "deep backstage" or deep personal, along with the intimacy felt from visual access into a vlogger's life (107). Raun's brief description of the deep backstage elicits an idea of exclusive narrative access into a vlogger's life (106-107). Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical concepts of the frontstage and backstage, other scholars like Marwick and boyd have also connected the concept of backstage to an audience's connection to microcelebrities (Goffman 13, 69; Marwick and boyd 143-144). Goffman characterizes backstage behavior by informality and familiarity, and frontstage by the lack of the same (78). Rachel Nguyen elicits this difference between her blog as her frontstage and her later-formed YouTube channel as more backstage; the former requiring a more formal performance, whereas the latter representing her supposed "true self" (*CHANNEL TRAILER*). By using the example of Rachel Nguyen's YouTube channel, I argue in this chapter that

authenticity and connection anchor sustained intimacy, which helps maintain an audience for self-presentation in the sub-genre of lifestyle vlogging.

2.2 *That's Chic* on YouTube

Rachel Nguyen has been running her YouTube Channel since 2014. She announced her move to YouTube in a blog post entitled "YouTube newcomer" while candidly speaking about her growing disinterest in blogging. Speaking of the new channel, she said, "…I picked up a camera and started recording myself. No photoshop, no pretty outfits, just me reminding myself every day to be true to myself and my friends." ("YouTube newcomer"). At that point, after seven years of working on her blog, she seemed to be wanting a new mode of self-expression and connection. Vlogging, unlike writing for a blog, is seen by her as a more simplistic and authentic mode of expression, which doesn't require the same frills as the photoshoots for her blog, but rather would just showcase her everyday life. Though vlogging too requires the labor of recording and editing, she does not seem to acknowledge it in comparison, as it still has the outcome of *authentic* self-documentation. Her readers in the comments resonate with her feelings and supported her new venture with excitement, as they had already seen a short vlog series she had done many years prior. The comments under the blog post read, "…Nice to see something raw from a blogger," "I love your authenticity! Loved the trailer and can't wait to see more videos," and "…I remember your vlogs from way way back. Excited for this project of yours…" ("Youtube Newcomer").

Nguyen's first stint on YouTube came years before the channel that exists today. She uploaded videos on a channel titled "raychizzle," starting in 2008, as an accompaniment to her blog ("raychizzle"). The series of eight uploads (ranging from March 2008 to October 2009) started off as just one vlog released in celebration of her 100th blog post (*That's Chic*). This became a recurring series due to popular demand to see this other, more personal side of Nguyen (*That's Chic 2*).

Fig. 6. *That's Chic*. Uploaded by raychizzle, 2008. *YouTube*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57-on-lKpIw.

As seen in Figure 6, the videos are shot on a laptop webcam inside a bedroom (*That's Chic 2*). They are minimally edited with no additional music or other aesthetic elements added. The vlogs bring out a new side of her, less to do with fashion and more to do with her own life and personality as well as her humor (*Pre-game in San Fran*; *That's Chic 5*). Recording this with a close friend, she presents her jovial self, which was previously not necessarily conveyed through her blog. So, especially in Nguyen's case, her shift between a blog that required professionalized presentation to a vlog that just documented her life *as it is*, justifies her view of vlogging as more authentic than blogging. Before starting her current channel, Nguyen also made her first YouTube appearance since "raychizzle" on hairstylist-photographer duo Anna Lee and Jesse's vlog while doing a photoshoot with Jesse in 2013 (*VLOG - May 14 - Young Hollywood*). Her cameo helped spark curiosity beyond her own followers and a larger interest in wanting her in front of the video camera, and preemptively generated interest in her upcoming channel. In this vlog, we also catch a glimpse of Nguyen with her camera, recording a clip that would be featured, a year later, on her first video on YouTube: a channel trailer.

As the first video uploaded on her channel, self-titled "Rachel Nguyen," the trailer is a comprehensive glimpse into what is to come (*CHANNEL TRAILER*). The shift from her *nom de plume*, That's Chic, on her blog, to Rachel Nguyen for her channel indicates the shift that is to come in her self-presentation. The channel trailer is a video montage of "behind the scenes" footage of Nguyen's life, running just slightly over a minute. It is cut together like a trailer, with upbeat music accompanying quick clips of her life– partying, with friends, travelling, and at fashion events. It starts off with the title "Who is Rachel Nguyen?"

indicating that this channel will provide the 'real' answer to that question. Through this channel, Nguyen is building on her pre-existing microcelebrity from her blog and using this as a way for her to connect with her audience on a deeper level. In the commentary on the video, she says, "…This is me, unedited, just raw." (*CHANNEL TRAILER*). The most interesting thing about this voiceover is how she is presenting this new medium (i.e., utilizing video as an extension to her blog) as a medium of "raw," "unedited" authenticity, which is contrary to the literal editing that videos go through before they're posted. Edited, or not, the viewers are promised so-called genuine self-representation and a display of her real life on this new channel (*CHANNEL TRAILER*). Right from her very first video, it is visible how she intends to "lower barriers" between herself and her audience (Goffman 129). Through the channel, she opens the door to let her audience into the backstage.

2.2.1 Backstage Access to Rachel Nguyen

The lifestyle Nguyen depicts through her vlogs is of both Rachel Nguyen the person and especially of Rachel Nguyen the microcelebrity b/vlogger. Several clips depict Nguyen in a literal backstage environment: on set, getting her hair done, or just goofing around, alone and with friends (Goffman 69-70). There are clips of the camera recording these videos, recording another camera taking photos, or a video of Nguyen. Most interestingly, there is a shot at the beginning of the channel trailer in which we see the vlog camera capture another camera capture her on yet another camera (Fig. 7). Assumably, she could be looking at photos taken for her blog on her camera while the other camera records her working on her blog. Through this, the vlog camera superimposingly records Nguyen in the process of already being seen behind the scenes. Through the two layers of being let in behind the scenes, not only do we quite literally enter the backstage of her self-presentation, but we do so twice over, giving the audience doubly intimate access to her.

Fig. 7. *CHANNEL TRAILER / That's Chic Introduction*. Uploaded by Rachel Nguyen, 2014. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9r1cHZeoFe4.

In another clip, we see her with some friends, having fun behind the scenes of a photoshoot. We also see her in front of her laptop, typing away, working on her blog (*CHANNEL TRAILER*). This goes to represent Nguyen beyond the image of fashionable youngster that was depicted on her blog to also show the immaterial labor that is carried out behind the scenes of content creation ("Microcelebrity and the branded self" 350). She turns this into another dimension of her personal presentation, using it as a device of exclusive access. It lets her audience see her under a light that she is known for but hasn't been seen performing until now, prompting this to feel like the deep backstage (Raun 106-107). Such footage continues to be shown over the years, especially in her #31DAYSOFTHATSCHIC (31 days of That's Chic) vlogmas series, which she began in 2015 (*#31DAYSOFTHATSCHIC*). Vlogmas was a popular YouTube challenge from the 2010s, for which YouTubers posted a vlog every day of December (Khairutdinov et al. 834). These vlogs were festive, including vlogs of creators gearing up for Christmas, and also showed 'boring,' mundane everyday life as opposed to the more entertaining content of regular vlogs. Since the production rate is so high, as vlogmas obligates daily uploads, we see Nguyen in a constant process of recording and editing in most #31DAYSOFTHATSCHIC vlogs. And thus, many times, she includes footage of her editing the previous video (or working on her blog) as one of her daily activities, which is usually seen done late at night and while she's alone (see *MONDAY SLUMPS*, *WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU HAVE CABIN FEVER*). The attraction of vlogmas, unlike other more embellished vlogs, was in being able to peer into the mundane and unembellished everyday life of Nguyen. The vlogmas sub-genre of vlogs can be seen as an intensified form of the "private authentic self," devoid of any personal

gatekeeping (Jerslev 5240). Further, the series title "#31DAYSOFTHATSCHIC" beyond being a moniker of her personal brand also attempts to blur the line between Rachel Nguyen and That's Chic, mentioned earlier in section 2.1. By allowing her audience to see her so intimately under the tag of her self-brand, she merges the two into one.

  #31DAYSOFTHATSCHIC vlogs are very chatty and introspective– a key characteristic of what now begins to define her style. Her first video for Vlogmas is very stripped down, with nothing particularly exciting happening. We follow Nguyen around in her car as she finishes some tasks. She is wearing a regular outfit (a plain, salmon-colored long-sleeved shirt and plain black pants) and a bare face. Unlike more spruced-up representations of her (as previously seen in section 1.3.2), this is a display of ordinariness, adding emphasis to her authentic self-representation ("I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend" 9; Hou 536). She is talking directly to the camera while at home and in her car (*#31DAYSOFTHATSCHIC*). Being close to camera makes this segment feels like the combination of a monologue and a talking head where the physical (lack of) distance of the camera mimics the affective proximity on display (Aran et al. 201; ("I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend" 5). These 'car talks' too become a recurring segment in her vlogs, acting as a moment where she gets to take some time in busy days to talk to her audience while alone. The 'on-the-go' nature of the car talks captures Nguyen in a very intimate and enclosed space– it is just her and her audience– alluding as an example of 'authenticity' as described by Dyer (26, 28). The spontaneity required (or enforced) by the Vlogmas format further indicates authenticity as characterized by Dyer: her presentation is both unpremeditated and private (31-32). As her drives could only be for a few hours at most (since in the vlogs, she's usually commuting within Los Angeles) and she is recording these segments in between running her actual chores, there is little room for re-recording or any other frills or set-up. She must present herself as she is, and she *chooses* to do so rather than not. At the start of her first Vlogmas vlog, while explaining why she is participating in Vlogmas, she makes a reference to her channel trailer, saying this is a way for her audience to get to know her on a more personal level. She says, "I don't know, I just wanted to do something raw, and because in my channel trailer I said that this channel is meant to be raw, unedited, just me. And while it is in the essence of it, I've kind of been really particular about every video I post because I want the quality to be great," inadvertently also reinforcing that curation still comes as an expectation with vlogging. As Vlogmas vlogs must be recorded every day, they show more of her beyond the vlogs she otherwise records at chosen moments, like important events and vacations. Her authenticity and display of a simple life help her

connect with her audience better. In doing so, it reinforces the reality of her self or the "'true' personality of the performer" and our connection to it (Dyer 26). By being let into the deep backstage, lifestyle vloggers elicit a sense of unique intimacy in the relationship of them and their viewers (Goffman 31). As an audience, the access provided by Nguyen builds a sense of deep connection with her. She then goes a step further in fostering this intimacy with her audience in her interactions with them.

2.2.2 Interactivity, Direct Addressal and Backstage Behavior

The direct addressal to the audience and lack of a fourth wall are crucial to what distinguishes the vlog format from more traditional visual media and allow for a direct relationship between audience and vlogger (Lange 39; Jerslev 5240). In 2018, after five years of #31DAYSOFTHATSCHIC, Nguyen decided to discontinue the series owing to burnout and a need for more privacy (*WHAT HAPPENS AFTER VLOGMAS?*). On an ending note, in her last Vlogmas video, she addressed her viewers, saying,

> I just want to thank you guys so so so much for being a part of my world, thank you for watching all my Vlogmases and all your amazing and sweet comments. I'm so happy that a lot of you guys have enjoyed this. And if not, then you know friends grow apart, it happens even with YouTube relations. Just having a community to feel connected with you and have some sort of outlet for myself, so thank you guys so much for all the years of vlogmas and everything we've all done together I will see you guys very soon. I love you guys. (*THE FINAL VLOGMAS EPISODE*)

She speaks very directly to the audience, as if having an actual conversation with them while saying goodbye. While this isn't her last video on the channel by any means, her emotional expression of gratitude is towards, in some way, losing the close and frequent contact brought by vlogmas. Her direct address to the audience by saying "you guys" and "I love you guys" and calling her viewers her friends ("…friends grow apart…") emphasizes the existence of an actual relationship between her and her viewers (Raun 106). She also explicitly makes her viewers interlocutors in the vlogmas series by saying, "thank you guys so much for all the years of vlogmas and everything we've all done together;" though it is only her who has performed the labor of producing this series, the existence of her audience as an outlet and receiver of her content has fueled its production for her ("Crying on Youtube" 92). The audience in this case is what Berryman and Kavka, in reference to Lauren Berlant, called "'a

silent, affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor' called into being by the address itself " ("Crying on Youtube" 92; "Cruel Optimism" 22).

Aside from direct addressal on camera, Nguyen tries to interact with her audience through comments. Despite having hundreds of thousands of followers, she has managed to stay as directly in touch with her audience as possible (Fig. 8). From her earlier days on YouTube to now, Nguyen can be seen in the comment section replying to at least a few comments and ensuring interactivity beyond one-sided viewership.
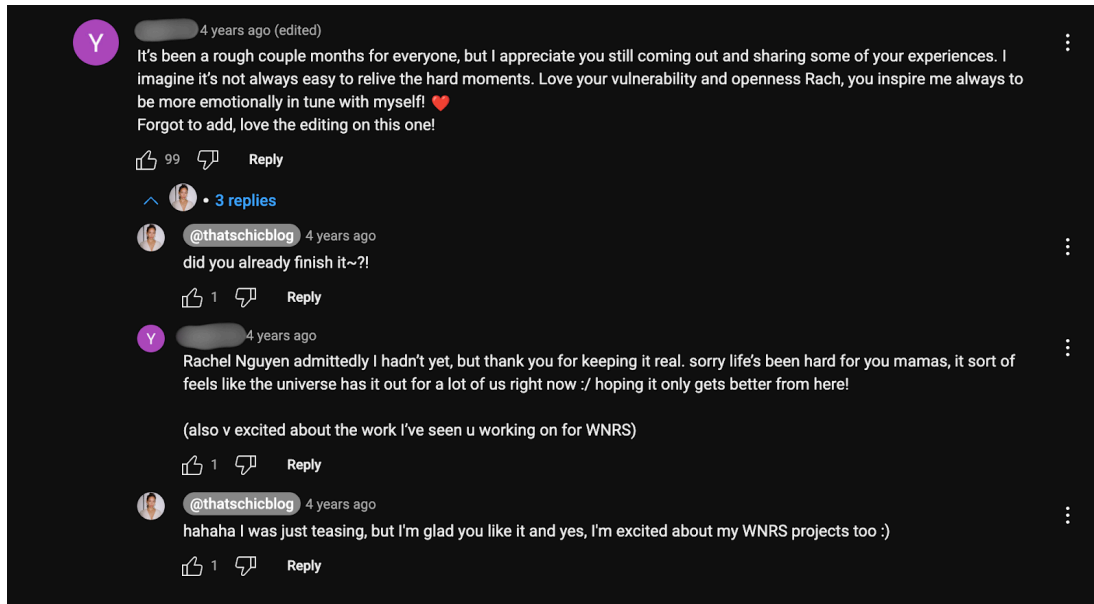

Fig. 8. Comment Section from *MOVING, SEPARATING, and HEALING | Catch-Up Vlog*. Uploaded by Rachel Nguyen, 2020. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJQ_l5cLdSo.

In the above screenshot, the viewer addresses her as "Rach," with ease and further establishes friendly conversation by saying "sorry life's been hard for you mamas." Nguyen is teasing in her response, "did you already finish it~?!" assumably because the user might have commented instantly after her upload, which resonates with the convivial environment she has created with her audience. In this interaction, we see, again, the presentation of her backstage in her use of language as well as that of the commenter (*MOVING, SEPARATING, and HEALING*). The above interaction shows many elements that Goffman considers to be a part of 'backstage language': first-naming ("Rach"), use of dialect ("mamas"), playful aggressivity and kidding ("did you already finish it~?!" "I was just teasing…") (78). The viewer and Nguyen end up having an entire conversation over one comment. Such examples, of which there are many in the comment sections of almost all her vlogs, show a genuine

desire for direct engagement and reciprocity rather than just views on her videos. As "backstage behavior is reserved for a reciprocal audience," her interest in interacting with her followers and making them feel included creates a sense of intentional belonging, strengthening the idea that her content is made for her viewers specifically– people that she can interact with and reciprocally relate to– rather than a general audience of just anybody (70). Backstage behavior is notably reserved for a select crowd of "reciprocal familiarity;" in displaying intimacy and familiarity with her audience, Nguyen inducts her viewers into her selective circle (Goffman 78).

2.2.3 Beyond YouTuber: Rachel Nguyen, the Big Sister

The proximity and connection established by lifestyle vloggers makes them not only an interesting figure to be entertained by but also a pseudo-big sister/friend, as indicated by Berryman and Kavka ("I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend" 3; see also "Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture"). In addition to authenticity, her openness in sharing her thoughts and the aspirationality generated by watching her vlogs are essential in creating the impression of her feeling like an older sister. Her "30 by 30 | Bucket List" vlog, uploaded in April 2019, is a good example of a combination of these traits. In it, she sits down at her desk, talking directly to the camera in this style for the first time since the last Vlogmas video, updates viewers on how she's been doing, and shares her bucket list of 30 things she wants to do before she turns 30 (*30 by 30*). She talks about her creative rut and need for personal reinvention before going through her list on camera. While sharing the list, she mentions in the video how, upon originally posting her list on Instagram, many followers made lists of their own and shared them with her or on their Instagram stories. The list is well-received by the audience in the comment section. Comments like "This was so inspiring but in a gentle, calm, and realistic way. Going to go do some things with my life now, thank you!" signal the success of her authentic, aspirational presentation (*30 by 30*). In December of 2019, weeks away from turning 30, she uploads a follow-up video on how she has been doing with her goals (*30 x 30 UPDATE*). This brings temporal continuity to her narrative outside of just vlogmas. The sustaining and continuous narrative is rewarding to those viewers who have followed her for all these months (if not longer). In this video, she honestly shares that she has not yet been able to attain some of her goals (like learning to play the piano and saving $40,000) but does give advice on how to implement the things that she has been able to follow through on, like time-blocking to focus better and meal-prepping. She says, once

again, while addressing the camera directly: "I'll be honest with you… things kind of sort of lose momentum along the way… don't beat yourself up because you haven't mastered the perfection of what you set out to be." (*30 x 30 UPDATE*). Although this is a video of her sharing the updates of her list and thus focused on her self-expression, she still involves her community of viewers in the process of checking in on the progress made in the last few months. Her *big sister-ness* in this video is once again echoed in the comment section through comments like "…Raych is defffff the big sister in this thatschic community 🥺 😩 💓 " (*30 x 30 UPDATE*).

The internet has witnessed her grow up, and in this process, witnessed her constantly striving for self-improvement through vulnerably and visibly expressing her process of self-growth. Especially long-term viewers of her channel have experienced this self-growth alongside her. The vast library of content, as well as the availability of being able to watch Nguyen at various stages of her life, maintains the revisitability, rewatchability, and relevance of her channel, which creates invested viewership regardless of the fact that she no longer produces content at the same rate. A comment on the channel trailer reads,

> just taking a nostalgia trip back. Rachel, her vlog style, her thoughts, artistic process, and the subcultures she created were so important to forming who I am now. I started watching her a decade ago as a young teen, and now I am the same age that she was when she started her channel. I'm coming back and binging her videos from the beginning as I experience my quarter-life crisis as I have an "I need a big sister!" moment (*CHANNEL TRAILER*).

The sustained viewing of Nguyen's life over the last 10 years, through her vlogs have maintained her relevance in her audience where, as the viewer notes, for a teenager who has grown up watching Nguyen's vlogs and continues to do so, their viewing turns into what feels like correspondence with an older sister. In the 10 years that Nguyen has been vlogging, she has been able to meaningfully connect with her audience rather than just give them content to watch. In the 250+ videos that she has posted since, she has managed to fulfill her promise of connection and authenticity. As Nguyen herself has used this medium to channel and navigate her growth, in hindsight, as noted by the commenter, her channel acts as a playbook for growing up and especially for growing up on the internet. Scheduled and frequent vlog uploads allow users to tune in regularly, keep up with the lives of their favorite vloggers, and build a sustained, deep connection with them. This leads to the formation of a large repertoire of videos that the same (or new) viewers return to when needed and binge to feel a nostalgic

connection to the vlogger, even allowing them to reminisce on their own life from that time as an opportunity to learn and reflect.

In the process of audiencing lifestreams, intimacy and the (presentational) self get reciprocally and bilaterally commodified. The two become inextricably linked and reliant on each other. In line with Fiske's definition of audiencing– roughly that a text and the audience of the text both cater to each other– the commodified self is an effect of the audience and the intimacy built with them (350, 358). At the same time, the intimacy expected with the audience through public-private self-presentation is what generates intimacy as a commodity in itself. So, where on one hand, a microcelebrity's self-presentation strikes a balance between the personal and public, it also acts to appropriately affect the audience. Through the combination of audiencing with a steady stream of content, vloggers build sustained intimacy between themselves and their viewers, resulting in revenue generation and the creation of a community.

Sustained intimacy and entering the deep backstage go hand in hand in the development and sustenance of deep connection with lifestyle vloggers. This forms the basis of the affective relationship between vloggers and their audience/s, affect, response, and the audience themselves can be controlled through the curation of content and persona. Establishing connection through deeper authenticity, especially with a preexisting audience of like-minded people, generates a sense of intimacy felt towards vloggers.

Chapter 3: Communication, Community and Rachel Nguyen's Corner of the Internet

Rachel Nguyen has grown up on the internet, and her audience has grown up with her. Having started her blog as a teenager and run her YouTube channel for over a decade now, she has spent half her life as a content creator and lifestreamer ("Meet Rachel Nguyen"). For Nguyen, community and connection have always been at the center of the world of *That's Chic* and have especially become important since her YouTube days. Interactivity, driven even if only by the comment section, made her YouTube channel a community space and her YouTube video, a community good. Nguyen is driven by a sense of community and the *raw* (and beautiful) documentation of her life rather than just money or fame. She calls her channel "a visual, moving diary," and as a diary, it has captured her through all her triumphs and tribulations while also allowing her to celebrate and process her feelings alongside a community of people ("Rachel Nguyen"). While for all these years, Nguyen maintained consistency with her scheduled posting, her approach to YouTube has changed drastically in the last few years.

As our rapidly digitalizing world became all the more digital with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Koch and Miles 1380). Quarantined and confined to our homes, all work, life, and leisure shifted to our screens (Yalın). While it became *the* way to stay in touch, it also left us burned out and exhausted from digital use (Sharma et al.). For content creators and ordinary internet users alike, this rapid change and consequent exhaustion, piling onto our previous decades of internet activity, has led many people to disconnect from the internet– or at least yearn for disconnection (Nassen et al.). Several prominent YouTubers are retiring or cutting down their scheduled posting from burnout and the pressure of performing the long-term immaterial labor of running their channels– presenting their balanced public-personal selves and sharing their lives through consistent video uploads (Dodgson). Hardt calls immaterial labor "the *affective labor* of human contact and interaction" (95). The combination of authentic performance and connective performance, blending the public and private selves, is a form of affective, immaterial labor (Yalın 3; Dobson et al. 9, 11). In performing the role of big sister, as mentioned in section 2.2.3, Nguyen is performing emotional, affective, immaterial labor. The sustained performance of immaterial labor produces "connectedness and community," which Nguyen supports through communication within her audience (Hardt 96).

Between experiencing the global pandemic and dilemmas of her own, Rachel Nguyen experienced a crisis of faith in the online world and began to rethink her corner of the internet. After a decade and a half of being a digital content creator, she was burned out not

just from being online but from the lack of control she felt over a life up for consumption. Fed up, Nguyen completely changed how she approached being on the internet. In the last few years, through a 'slow' approach to content creation, she has focused on creating content for her community and for the sake of timeless documentation. Simultaneously, through her Slack group, Warde, she has built a real and tangible community within her audience, extending vlogger-viewer relationships beyond existing levels of proximity.

3.1 High-speed Society and Slow Content Creation

Our current digital society can be described as one of social acceleration– a "high-speed society," as sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls it ("High-speed Society" 11, 26). Everything is evolving and changing at rapid rates, creating a world that is ever-dynamic. Powered by turbo-capitalism, new technology is always emerging, simultaneously transforming our relationship with it, and our ways of relating to each other through it ("High-speed Society" 80). Social acceleration is Rosa's way of understanding and defining the society brought about by fast-paced technological and social changes ("High-speed Society" 81-83). In the 15 years since Rosa introduced this concept, we've come to move faster than ever, and only more so in a post-pandemic world. Sociologist Magdalena Kania-Lundholm recently proposed that social acceleration has led to digital disconnection (14). More and more people are choosing to go offline to combat the exhaustion of constant connectivity and instead connect with others, nature, or oneself (Kania-Lundholm 20). Digital disconnection involves a detachment from technology in a dual sense of material disconnection and in relation to time (Vanden Abeele et al. 3-4; Light). Especially since the COVID years, digital detoxification, better known as digital detox, has become a growing movement and a necessity (Schmitt et al.; Mirbabaie et al). A digital detox is the colloquial term for taking a break from digital usage, often from social media, but also from electronic devices like laptops and phones in general, often to reset in response to overuse or overstimulation (Syvertsen and Enli 1271; Radtke et al 192-193). As digital citizens spending a significant amount of time on the internet, at this point, our private selves and digital public are merged, and especially so for veteran lifestyle b/vloggers like Nguyen. This emphatically necessitates digital detoxification (Kour 79,81).

In the last decade, we've witnessed a wave of several prominent YouTubers retiring from the platform, owing to the need to disconnect (Alvarez; Mayer). Nguyen has been creating content on the internet for 18 years now and has run her YouTube channel since

2014. In her 12 years on YouTube, she's uploaded 268 videos, averaging close to 30 uploads a year until 2021. Since 2022, Nguyen has only posted 15 videos in total and archived her blog, *That's Chic*. While she posts infrequently, her new videos have a deeper, philosophical, and well-produced documentary feel. She has detached from the expected process of content creation and the prescribed notion of frequent uploads, focusing rather on sharing when she wished and specifically for the audience she became close to. In an interview in 2023, she said,

> "…I started my YouTube channel, and I was like, *I am here to be raw*. Because at the time the internet and influencer zeitgeist was to take photos on a nice backdrop with a DSLR…I wanted to break down the barrier, and I feel like I did… I started really having conversations with people in the comment section. It wasn't like I was just allowing and receiving without giving back. I was like, *Oh, this is a communal thing*." (Blitzer).

It is interesting that she notes the "influencer zeitgeist" as contrasting with a connective digital community. Influencers, broadly, are internet celebrities who have a large audience and sway over that audience; they "publish curated information" with the help of professional equipment/techniques and monetize highly from their content and brand name (Gretzel 147; Maares and Hanusch 266; Abidin 3). Being an influencer is as much about building and growing this following as it is about having it (Abidin 3). However, by these definitions, the role of an influencer reads as rather one-sided and certainly more detached as compared to the intimacy built by Nguyen with her audience, as described in Chapter 2. Nguyen fits into several of the above-mentioned specs– she is, after all, an ordinary internet user who gained a large following through the publication of textual and visual information about her life online. She has also been monetizing off her content and made money from sponsorships and affiliate links (see *FOOD DIARIES*; *Is It Weird to Have a Closet Inventory?*). But, she doesn't display the tenacity of wanting to accumulate a larger following or obscene revenue. Her focus on *communication* within her digital *community* sets her apart as a uniquely *communicative* microcelebrity. She also distinguishes herself through her contempt for influencing and how confined the space of YouTube has become over the years. In an interview with *Lens Magazine*, she said,

> "It feels as though right now the internet is owned by brands. [Influencing has] become very soulless because influencers are no longer trying to connect to an audience—they're first and foremost trying to connect to brands. I was so turned off by that because I like to make things for an audience of one. When I got lost from that

and was making content that pandered to brands, I lost that relationship with myself. I
no longer owned my content because brands owned my content." (Adasi).

In being an 'anti-influencer,' she garners a very niche, reciprocal audience of people who
flock to her and remain as followers; in return, she caters her content to this niche audience.
Such a resonant relationship was proposed by Rosa as the solution to social acceleration. He
first coopted the term sociologically in 2013, calling it the dual movement of affect and
emotion (Rosa). In creating a resonant relationship with her viewers, Nguyen created a
comfortable digital space for herself and her process of content production. We can label this
act as curated audiencing, where, rather than attempting to gain fame in a general sense,
anti-influencers like Nguyen build a curated audience of like-minded people.

3.1.1 Anti-Influencer Approach and Selectivity

Her contempt towards the process of influencing and its transactionality led her to
stop letting brands dictate her content by no longer making sponsored videos. While
sponsored videos and brand collaborations were already a rare occurrence on her channel, she
hasn't posted any sponsored content since 2021. Her last explicit brand deal was with the
global car manufacturer, Hyundai. Dated 29 June 2021, this is also the last video Nguyen
posted before shifting to infrequent uploads and displaying a general disconnection with
YouTube (HyundaiWorldwide). With videos like *8 eco-friendly morning musings*, *food
diaries | what i eat in a week*, *closet concessional | marie kondo organizing*, displaying an
environmentally conscious lifestyle, Nguyen built the image of a sustainable influencer.
Hyundai collaborated with Nguyen to make an eco-friendly 'what i consume' video– a style
of vlogs in which people usually share what they eat in a day– to promote their
carbon-neutral hydrogen-powered car NEXO ("What I Consume - Rachel Nguyen's Record
of Her Carbon Neutral Day"). In the video, Nguyen reflects on carbon footprint and the
"carbon cost" of her daily activities, after which she suggests some daily habits to offset our
carbon footprint, like taking cold showers and air-drying laundry. As the video was part of a
brand deal with a multi-billion-dollar car manufacturer whose other cars account for so much
pollution and environmental damage that could never possibly be overturned by any
individual's lifestyle changes, her viewers found the video to be tone-deaf (mermaidkiki).
Nguyen took down the video from her channel, but it remains up on Hyundai's, alongside an
accompanying article on their website. She addressed the incident in a 2023 interview, saying
she took the deal because the money was good, but considers it a mistake and expressed that
she had an awakening that "[she] no longer owned [her] content because brands owned [her]

content" (Adasi). Instead, she has chosen to monetize the skill she has cultivated all these years of video-making by launching a course on *ilovecreatives*, thus also in some way still giving back to her community rather than be puppeted by big brands ("Video Creator ✳Course™").

She seems to have become a lot more introspective and reclusive since, posting videos that are either of high production value where her editing skills come to shine and she shows her life akin to a Terrence Malick film ("a love letter 💌 "), very introspective, spiritually guided and emotionally open which work to maintain her connections built through negative affect ("a breakthrough") or videos like 33 MANTRAS, where she shares 33 lessons she's learned in her 33 years of life that act as a teaching moment for her viewers for them to introspect on themselves. She uploads around 2-3 videos a year, and though her content follows her usual style, it feels more mindful and deliberate. She expresses her new philosophy in "i want to own my content," a nine and half minute talking head-style video in which she records herself on her MacBook camera against the backdrop of her laptop home screen while she expresses her burnout from being a content creator for half her life and outgrowing the internet after growing alongside it. She says that as the pandemic unfolded and the internet was rife with user-generated content, she took a step back to observe– went on "hedonistic autopilot," as she called it– and noticed that content creation now had a "recipe" that replaced the "internal authentic source," and content had reached a point where it pandered to brands than audiences. She adds,

> While I feel like TikTok, Instagram, and all these sort of algorithm-chasing things have really like numbed us and flattened us as a society, I don't want to run away from that. I feel really called to protect creativity on the internet, so I come back here with a new outlook on life that I want to apply to my corner of the internet, the idea of making slower, timeless things to watch… (*i want to own my content*)

Her moment of disconnection seems to have given her clarity that perhaps could not have come without the distance, allowing her to choose to transform her approach to content creation rather than step away completely. Though Nguyen hasn't displayed the tenacity of wanting to accumulate a larger following or obscene revenue, even before this breakthrough, she makes a novel point here in calling for a temporal shift in content creation by "making slower, timeless things to watch." In an article titled 'Slow Journeys,' Daisy Tam equates slowness to timelessness, relating it to the concept of time as kairos rather than chronos, viewing time qualitatively, not just quantitatively (213). To make slow content is to make content that is valuable and impactful, rather than content for mere consumption. Her

long-term experience of being a content creator compels her to "protect creativity on the internet" by changing her own outlook towards content creation. It falls in line with the slow media movement, which arose as a response to hyperconnectivity and overproduction (Rauch 1). Slow cultures arise in opposition to capitalistically driven fast cultures and to combat the damage done by them (Osbaldiston 1-2). The wave of YouTube retirements and Nguyen's own disconnection from the platform showcase the breaking point that we have reached in YouTube's two-decade-long history as a space for lifestreaming. In a world where user-generated content is both the present and future, and when user-generated short-form content through TikTok and Instagram is on the rise, healthier alternatives to selling personal life as commodity need to be established or at least begin to be thought about. Slow, intentionally made content would create more value for the labor put into it and would allow more agency in terms of what to share and how much of it.

Nguyen provides a template, as a starting off point, for slow content creation, which could help combat the need for disconnection experiences in our hyperdigital age. While she is still performing affective labor, she is doing so at her own pace and being more in control of what she chooses to share. For the past few years, Nguyen has moved out of LA and into a van and quite literally disconnected; she is first seen in her van in her first documentary-like video titled *ROMANCE OF THE ROAD* in 2021. This vlog is quite different from her older ones, as there is more of a focus on her surroundings seen through her eyes than on her talking to the camera. We still hear her voice and thus feel her presence, but are made to look outside of her and at her world. In this moment of offline disconnection, she still takes her audience with her through her camera, making it a collective experience even while she experiences it alone (*ROMANCE OF THE ROAD*). Seemingly, her current approach to content creation has struck a balance between having more agency, a certain level of disconnection, and still getting to share a strong bond with her audience through this selective 'affective self-disclosure' ("Crying on YouTube" 95; *december is for yapping*).

3.2 Relatability and Reciprocating Negative Affect

Nguyen's expression of negative affect also acts as a ground for Nguyen to process difficult moments alongside her digital community, allowing them to do the same. In 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global quarantine, Nguyen's life changed completely, and so did her YouTube presence. In a video titled "MOVING, SEPARATING, and HEALING | Catch-Up Vlog," uploaded in May of that year, she laid out

big life updates about moving houses and breaking up with her long-term boyfriend. As a result of these changes and experiencing self-isolation, she is saddened, as anyone would be, but is also trying to make sense of the situation and explain herself to her audience. She ends the video saying,

> (1) "…it's really hard to explain my thought process behind it. (2) But I'm really interested in hearing some of your guys' comments because you guys are so much better at articulating my thoughts than I am when I'm trying to explain something. Thank you guys for being here and being special people and giving me the space to sort of vent and talk, and yeah, (3) I hope you guys enjoyed this video. It was really hard for me to go through that footage. (4) Stay safe out there. Let us know if you need anything. Bye!" (*MOVING, SEPARATING, and HEALING | Catch-Up Vlog*)

This one-minute section marks several indicators of the oncoming shift in Nguyen's content and her approach to her content; it is a precursor to the thoughts that guide how she will change in the coming years. I have marked the quote into four sections to analyze it. In section 1, she hints at the compulsion she feels to perform affective labor for her audience, while section 3 displays the dissonance in turning life into content and having to share sorrow as media to be consumed. Under an earlier video posted during the period right before her move and break up, a viewer commented, "Are you and Wes okay? … I just don't see love in his eyes when he looks at you…Just an observation. <3 Love is different for everyone after all," to which Nguyen responded "It's a lot to unbox, one that I'm not gonna try to explain over the internet, but the core of what you're seeing is him actually shutting down completely when a camera is on. we're lucky we have footage of wes in the wild hahaha" (*December Musing | IRL TO URL VLOG*). When sharing life from such an intimate distance for as long as she has been vlogging, it is difficult to distinguish what to share and what to keep private. The openness and interactive atmosphere within her digital intimate public solicits her followers to question or chime in on such more private aspects of her life. Her response shows a conflict between wanting to maintain privacy, by saying it's too much to explain on the internet, and justifying or dismissing the observation by joking about it. In the vlogs going forward, she becomes more private about her private life. Though she maintains her established vulnerability by keeping the audience informed about personal events, she also becomes self-preservedly cryptic about very personal aspects of her life, drawing a clear line between what she wants viewed and what not. For example, in the content filmed since starting a new relationship, she has avoided showing her partner's face on camera (see "ROMANCE OF THE ROAD | Van Life Vlog;" "A Love Letter ❤ "). Additionally, her

sporadic, unscheduled posting has allowed her to process these emotions better without having to send them out to the world as this week's vlog.

Sections 2 and 4 express her feelings towards her community and the reciprocity between her and her audience. While on one hand, she feels compelled to shepherd her audience through her life and emotions, she also recognizes their active roles in her emotional community. In a comment liked by Nguyen, one viewer has said "This is a corner on the internet where I feel heard, even without me ever speaking. Love to you Rachel ❤️" alongside another viewer who commented "This video just made me cry... it somehow, unintentionally.... brought so much clarity to my life... like a song that hits you by expressing exactly how you feel. thank you Rachel thank you." The comment shows how much the audience is able to find themselves in her. Many viewers even comment on being able to relate to leaving a long relationship, even leading to interactions between each other in the comments. One viewer commented, "I'm amazed by how many people had a relationship for about 7 years.... Cause I'm leaving a 7yr relationship too and it's been sooo so so difficult…watching your video it does help me remind myself that it will pass. All hardships pass eventually. Thank you for this beautiful video." They reciprocate, understand, and validate her feelings. Nguyen's affective labor and the vulnerability she displays create solace for her viewers to process their own struggles. The established relatability in the digital intimate public of Nguyen allows for the exchange of vulnerability. Nguyen expresses a lot of emotional vulnerability, or negative affect, in sharing her burnout, her confusion, feeling lost, and also by crying on camera as evidenced in this video ("Crying on YouTube" 87). Kanai defines relatability as "an affective relation produced through labour that reflects a desirable notion of common experience to an unknown audience" (*Gender and Relatability* 3-4). She adds that relatability is not necessarily about being generally perceptible but rather refers to the proximity cultivated within a specific audience through "careful moderation" and often also the expression of negative affect ("Girlfriendship and Sameness" 303; *Gender and Relatability* 31). Through mutual relatability, the sea of unknown viewers become mutually resonant. The relationship between a vlogger and their audience is traditionally of the *affector* and *affected*, but Nguyen attempts to modify that. As mentioned in chapter 1, the resonant relationship between creator and audience is one of "joint dynamic interplay" ("Affective resonance and social interaction" 1014). In the relationship between audience and vlogger, there is a primary exchange of content for viewership, but also a secondary, mutual construction of community, growing from sustained intimacy discussed in chapter 2.

3.3 Co-creating Community

In return for their viewership and sustained interest, the audience gains a sense of community within Nguyen's "corner of the internet" (*MOVING, SEPARATING, and HEALING | Catch-Up Vlog*). In an interview for the *New York Times*, she said, "I don't want people to follow me. I want to be in the crowd with everyone" and with that very intention she started a Slack group for her followers, creating a direct line of communication and a reciprocally intimate space with her followers (Brown). In an attempt to build a symbiotic community within her digital intimate public, Nguyen built *Warde*, a *Slack* group for her friends and followers alike. She launched Warde in July of 2019, which she describes to be "like one big, giant group chat" (Brown, "30 x 30 UPDATE | Bucket List," 6:22). While on YouTube, she was always in a position of being spectated, limited to interactions with her audience through the comments section, but the communication platform, *Slack*, allowed her to exercise direct engagement and reciprocity. The group was run with the help of moderators, distributing the labor required to nourish the community of close to 7000 people (Adasi; Tan and Otieno). Though she remained the center of this community in this scenario, the responsibility to maintain it is not solely hers; thus, she gains the experience of being a participant within her own digital intimate public.

The internet's burgeoning interconnectivity makes pockets of the internet feel like their own communities, better described by digital feminist scholar Kanai as 'digital intimate publics' (294). The digital intimate public is Kanai's adaptation of Lauren Berlant's 'intimate public' to the digital sphere ("Girlfriendship and Sameness" 294; Berlant 5). Berlant originally defined an intimate public as a collectivity of people who share "a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments" (5). Digital intimate publics are the digital manifestations of an intimate public among users connected through common interests related to media forms, lifestyles, etc ("Girlfriendship and Sameness" 293-296). Kanai argues that digital intimate publics "are structured along different patterns of labor and exclusion in that the premise of DIY participation provides opportunities for some to feel central through their own labor," and is reliant on participants rather than just catered towards them ("Girlfriendship and Sameness" 298).

While digital intimate publics can exist in many forms (fandoms, interest groups, support groups, etc), and on many different platforms (Reddit, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, etc), one distinctly interesting form of a digital intimate public is those built around social media celebrities, particularly lifestyle vloggers. Digital intimate publics of the vlogosphere exist halfway between having centralized and decentralized control. Where other digital

intimate publics, like Kanai's example of the Tumblr blog, "WhatShouldWeCallMe" in the paper "Girlfriendship and sameness: affective belonging in a digital intimate public," revolving around girlhood or media fandoms for popular shows, like r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus or r/TheWhiteLotusHBO, are more or less entirely democratically controlled, digital intimate publics of the vlogosphere are a unique internet phenomenon where one person (or a group of people), the vlogger, functions as the central connector of the community, possessing control of running the community, in a way, and creating spaces for other users to participate ("Girlfriendship and Sameness" 293). The vlogger here also acts as the shared interest of the group of people, since the people within this digital intimate public feel more connected to the vlogger than they do to each other. In the digital intimate public of a vlogger, the audience feels this connection specifically with the vlogger through whom we are let into their lives. Additionally, vloggers, and especially Nguyen, create a sense of intentional belonging within their audience and build interactive digital communities to maintain the connection built through their vlogs.

During the pandemic, *Warde* became a space of communion for the members of Nguyen's digital community. She started the group to expand community building beyond the "soapbox" of YouTube (*Checking in and Saying Hi*). It is described as "the house that we all wish we grew up in," "a co-operated safe space that is defined by its contribution," and a platform of learning and exchange ("Warde"). It contains different channels, as seen in figure 9, which members can be a part of and a larger, general channel for in-group communication ("Warde").
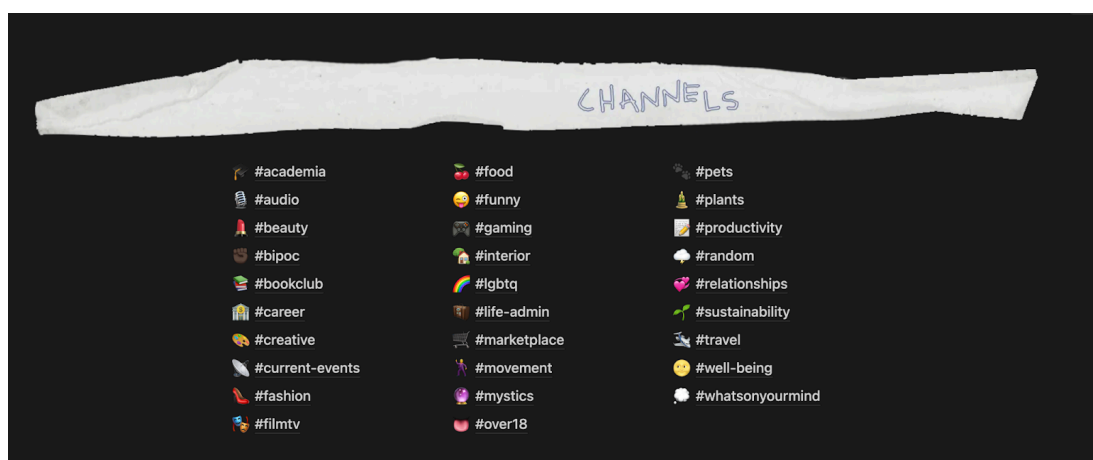

Fig. 9. "Warde." *Warde on Notion*,

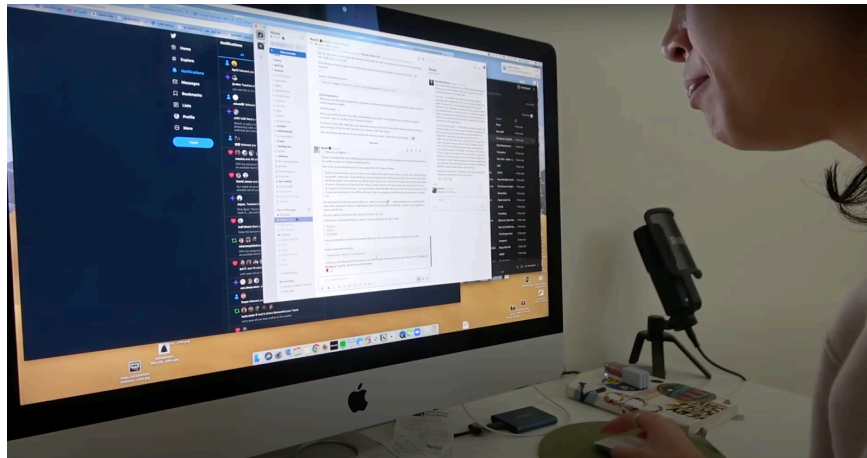https://warde.notion.site/Warde-4c6d3bc66855487ba829fbfca942e678.

Fig. 10. *Checking in and Saying Hi*. Uploaded by Rachel Nguyen, 2020. *YouTube*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfM3PYW_-IA.

Nguyen and her digital community were most active on *Warde* during the pandemic when the group acted as a much-needed virtual community (Brown). Though access to the group is possible only by filling out an application and being approved by the moderators, several of Nguyen's videos from the time show her on the group on her computer, either talking to the members, texting, or participating in group activities (Fig. 10) (*Checking in and Saying Hi*). In a video from April 2021, she is seen participating in the group's 'April hottie challenge' (*APRIL HOTTIE*). In the video, she shows footage of her texts on the group, followed by a virtual dance party, and then describes the April hottie challenge to the viewers as a collective feel-good, self-care activity for that month, designed by the group, complete with points and a scoreboard (*APRIL HOTTIE*). The group thus becomes a platform of communication, and then by being used Nguyen's vlogs also gets remediated into content, making the vlog a collaborative creation (Garde-Hansen 106).

Nguyen's continued connective spirit is present throughout her body of work, and beyond it as well. In the cocreation of community within the digital intimate public of vlogospheres, the traditional relationship of fan and celebrity is reimagined reciprocal connection. The affordances of Web 2.0 go beyond allowing self-celebrification to also build a new understanding of celebrity in the internet era, in pairing user-generated content with various other lines of communication and digital proximity. In her journey from amateur blogger to veteran microcelebrity, Nguyen has returned to creating content for content creation's sake, only now with a community to share it with.

Conclusion

In the two decades since Rachel Nguyen's internet existence and that of YouTube, digital self-presentation has rapidly evolved to form its own new dimension of cultural celebrity. By simultaneously charting lifestreaming practices and Nguyen's engagement with forms of lifestreaming, this thesis aimed to understand the novel practices of self-presentation, interactivity, and engagement, in relation to the idea of microcelebrity. In doing so, the thesis has shown that a precarious but delicate balance must be maintained between the public and private selves in order to generate and maintain the status of microcelebrity as well as to stay connected with one's audience. While the maintenance of this balance might be difficult to achieve, certain elements of self-presentation, like professional self-branding, authenticity expressed through openness, and relatability, act as a good template to growing and preserving microcelebrity status. Further, the incentive of community and connection aids both lifestreamer and viewer to cultivate a close and invested reciprocal relationship.

Nguyen, having been a digital creator for close to two decades now, has both witnessed the changes to Web 2.0 that came with technological developments over the years and, in some ways, also represented those very changes. She began as an amateur fashion blogger as a teenager when blogging first became popular and gained traction as the medium did. As vlogging gained popularity and blogs began to lose the same relevance they once held, Nguyen switched to lifestyle vlogging. She utilized her blog to explore and cement her self-brand and simultaneously built a following. Then, she used her switch to the visual medium of vlogging as a way to connect with her pre-existing (and new) audience. The sustained, authentic display of her backstage self and backstage life through her vlogs generated a sense of (sustained) intimacy in her viewers, and her niche of honest, aspirational, big-sister-like content led to a solidification of her audience. Sustained intimacy acts as a form through which fame is proximatized and does so in three parts: through resonance, authenticity, and aspiration. These facets depend on the self-presentation of the central figure of a digital intimate public, in this case Nguyen's, and her balance of the personal and public. Internet fame, through self-celebrification, is achieved in the delicate balance between the private and public self. In successfully managing this balance, the vlogger resonates with and grows an audience that becomes integral to maintaining their relevance.

Her digital self-presentation developed from being for her own diaristic self-documentation to becoming catered to her audience. Now, in a post-pandemic world, as

new digital avenues show potential for growth, Nguyen has honed her digital intimate public and fostered it through her Slack group, *Warde*, while also shifting gears to slow, intentionally produced content. She shows a knack for understanding the digital space in a unique way in relation to user-generated content, and subsequently successfully forms a following and community around the ventures she adopts. Her growing contention with digital self-presentation, owing mainly to its rapid commercialization, makes her an important figure through whom to understand the contemporary creator landscape. As she entered the world of UGC on the ground floor, she has developed a knack for understanding *the internet*, as evidenced by her sustaining digital presence and audience relevance. Nguyen's early recognition of the social formation that resonates with her has allowed her to carefully cater her work to them while achieving creative satisfaction in creating for them. Through audiencing within this community, Nguyen has not only successfully obtained celebrity but also a symbiotic digital intimate public. Her inkling towards building a community outside of the institutionalized space of YouTube could be a practice that could catch on in the coming years.

In the 30-odd years since the boom of interactivity brought about by Web 2.0, we have experienced entire lives on the internet– the ups and downs and everything in between. We exist now at a point where we can look back and map the entire process of how we've gotten here, to the point of a fast-paced, formulaic digital world of user-generated content. In a world of rapid social acceleration, digital community building acts as a haven of connection. Nguyen, as a case study, demonstrates the importance of symbiosis in maintaining an audience and shows us that connection is the anchor of digital relevance. Her vlog camera acts a diary, communicative device, and window of spectatorship all at once. It mediates the self and facilitates the presentation of the self as content. The possibility of resonance and community through it humanizes this process, bringing affect and emotion into the digital. Within a digital intimate public of the vlogosphere, the trade-off between vlogger and audience is of content for the audience and fame for the vlogger, while both parties gain a sense of community.

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