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PERFORMING GENDER ON YOUTUBE

How Jenna Marbles negotiates a hostile online environment

Lindsey Wotanis and Laurie McMillan

The contemporary online environment is often touted as a democratic space, open to perspectives that might regularly be excluded from professionally-controlled media platforms. However, females are underrepresented on YouTube, a popular video-sharing internet social media platform. This underrepresentation of women suggests that gender matters on YouTube. In order to contribute to research on gender dynamics on YouTube, this study focuses on the most-subscribed female YouTuber, Jenna Mourey. The first part investigates the degree to which Mourey’s YouTube reception could be understood as misogynistic and hostile. To this end, comments on Mourey’s top-ten videos were compared to viewer comments on the top-ten videos of a male counterpart: Ryan Higa. The second part of the study focuses on the content and style of Mourey’s video oeuvre in order to contribute to research on YouTubers who successfully negotiate a hostile environment. Mourey’s tendency to perform gender extremes—both masculine and feminine roles—is an ongoing feature of her videos, allowing her to simultaneously critique and benefit from traditional gender roles. This two-part study of gender on YouTube thus both supports research describing harsh responses to women on video-sharing sites and offers one YouTube performer’s strategy for achieving success in this environment.

KEYWORDS YouTube; Jenna Marbles; Ryan Higa; gender performance; Jenna Mourey

Introduction

In February 2012, only nine of the fifty most-subscribed YouTube channels featured female performers, and only one of these female-led channels was ranked in the top ten. This underrepresentation of women suggests that gender matters on YouTube, but how gender matters is not clear. While some studies point to males spending more time on video-sharing sites such as YouTube (Mary Madden 2009; Heather Molyneaux, Susan O’Donnell, Kerri Gibson, and Janice Singer 2008, 4), other statistics find the opposite (Brian Chappell 2012), and still other research suggests that males and females are equally represented in terms of viewership (Kathleen Moore 2011) and content creation (Lee Rainie, Joanna Brenner, and Kristen Purcell 2012). No matter which picture is most accurate, none accounts for the paucity of female YouTubers ranked in the top fifty most-subscribed channels.

A possible answer for the gender imbalance may be found in qualitative research and anecdotal reports on YouTube suggesting that although video-sharing environments
potentially can create “a participatory model of culture” that includes “multiple voices and an expanded flow of information” (Douglas Kellner and Gooyong Kim 2009, 2–3), such an ideal is rarely achieved. Indeed, rather than operating democratically in ways that offer males and females similar opportunities, YouTube videos may be subject to “surveillance, judgment, and evaluation—practices signaling consumer agency but simultaneously disciplining and constituting subjects” (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2011, 288). The literature suggests that much of this disciplining is sexist and gendered, affecting female participants to a greater extent than male participants (Azy Barak 2005; Jodi Biber, Dennis Doverspike, Daniel Baznik, Alana Cober, and Barbara A. Ritter 2002; Susan Herring, Kirk Job-Sluder, Rebecca Scheckler, and Sasha Barab 2002; Clancy Ratliff 2007). Still, despite observations of problematic interactions, scholars also regularly focus on users who participate in YouTube as a way of being heard and building community (Patricia G. Lange 2007b, 2007c; Roger Saul 2010). As a whole, then, the literature points to YouTube as a site that can potentially both reinscribe and challenge gender inequities.

In order to contribute to research on gender dynamics on YouTube, this study focuses on the most-subscribed female YouTuber, Jenna Mourey (whose YouTube channel is titled JennaMarbles). The study was conducted in two parts. The first part investigated the degree to which Mourey’s YouTube reception could be understood as misogynistic and hostile. Comments posted to videos served as a primary measurement of community reaction to the content and performer. To target the effects of performer gender on reception, comments on Mourey’s top-ten videos in February 2012 were compared to viewer comments on the top-ten videos of a male counterpart: Ryan Higa (whose YouTube channel is titled Nigahiga). Mourey and Higa are close in age (twenty-six and twenty-two years old, respectively), have similar comedic styles, and seem to target similar teen and young adult audiences. The categorization and analysis of comments on these two channels—one featuring a female and the other featuring a male performer—ultimately offered quantitative evidence that supports earlier findings of hostility toward women on YouTube. Evidence of misogyny directed toward Mourey, the most successful female YouTube performer, suggests the seriousness of hostility toward women on video-sharing sites and provides a framework for the next part of this analysis.

The second part of the study thus focused on the content and style of Mourey’s video oeuvre in order to contribute to research on YouTubers who successfully negotiate a hostile environment. While Mourey’s popularity is certainly not based on one factor, her tendency to perform gender extremes—both masculine and feminine roles—is an ongoing feature of her videos. Gender performances and parody in Mourey’s videos operate at both implicit and explicit levels, allowing her to simultaneously critique and benefit from traditional gender roles. This two-part study of gender on YouTube thus both supports research describing harsh responses to women on video-sharing sites and offers one YouTube performer’s strategy for achieving success in this environment.

Review of the Literature

YouTube as Hostile Space

Video-sharing takes place across the internet, and commercial sites such as Vimeo, NetFlix, and Hulu are on the rise. YouTube is a prime medium to study because it is currently the most active video-sharing site and because users not only view but also create
and comment on video content. YouTube has grown exponentially since its launch in the spring of 2005, with more than eight hundred million unique users visiting the site each month (Statistics). Paul Haridakis and Gary Hanson (2009) found that YouTube is a uniquely social medium (330), so it is not surprising that YouTube has created “Community Guidelines” by which users are expected to abide. The guidelines defend free speech while addressing a range of problematic behaviors not permitted, including violence, abuse, hate speech, harassment, and sexually explicit content (YouTube Community Guidelines). Users can report instances of community guideline violations by flagging videos, which are then reviewed. When videos violate community guidelines, YouTube will remove them; repeat offenders are supposedly banned from the site.

However, YouTube does not explicitly address violations of community guidelines that occur in comments responding to videos. All users can flag comments as spam, but other community violations fall to individual channel owners to address. When posting a video, YouTubers may disable or screen comments; they can also delete comments posted to their videos. Still, even though many YouTube performers say they have been “emotionally hurt” by comments exhibiting “hating behavior,” these same performers often choose not to moderate comments at all because more viewer interaction on a site is likely to increase popularity (Patricia G. Lange 2007a, 25). The result is that the site claims to have no tolerance for “hate speech” and other abusive behaviors, but many users still make comments that even to an untrained eye are violations of YouTube policies.

YouTube thus has a reputation as a site full of “abusive comments,” a situation which is “exacerbated by anonymity (so that there are few disincentives to behave badly) and scale (so that it becomes difficult to keep up with policing and moderating comments)” (Jean Burgess and Joshua Green 2009, 96). Comments may be used as a tool to value some YouTube performers and condemn others. With such a self-governing system, it may be no surprise that, on YouTube, the most popular videos and channels represent “far less racial diversity than broadcast network television” (John McMurria 2006). While some “minority content . . . circulates on YouTube” and may reach a niche audience, “there’s little or no chance that such content will reach a larger viewership” (Henry Jenkins 2009, 124).

YouTube performers may be targeted not only on the basis of race and other social markers but also in terms of gender. Awareness of women being harassed on vlogs has prompted the question, “Is this new technology producing new social relations—or a rerun of old-style social relations with which we are all too familiar?” (Toby Miller 2009, 427). As Herring et al. (2002), Molyneaux et al. (2008), and Ratliff (2007) show, gender often plays a role in social dynamics on YouTube. For example, in her research on videos featuring teen and tween girls, Banet-Weiser (2011) found that the young performers “are judged and gain value according to how well the girls producing [the videos] fit normative standards of femininity” (288–289). Comments thus police the behavior and representation of girls in terms of gendered norms. Such reception is not confined to the videos of young girls, but, rather, “sexist and often abusive comments” are a part of YouTube culture—so commonplace that even “prominent female YouTubers have to contend with” such reception (Burgess and Green 2009, 96).

Danielle Keats Citron (2009) finds that the public tends to trivialize the harm that “cyber gender harassment” can inflict. Often victims are portrayed “as overly sensitive complainers” while those inflicting harassment are treated “as juvenile pranksters” (Citron 2009, 375–376). Other times the problem is minimized because people believe it is simply part of the online world that “victims can ignore or defeat with counterspeech,”
advancing the argument that those who are unable to deal with the problem should just abandon online interactions (Citron 2009, 375–376). Such sentiments end up “discouraging women from reporting cyber gender harassment and preventing law enforcement from pursuing cyber-harassment complaints” (375–376). Furthermore, such harassment can have deep and long-lasting effects on women, and in many ways shut them out of online communities:

[Cyber gender harassment] discourages them from writing and earning a living online. It interferes with their professional lives. It raises their vulnerability to offline sexual violence. It brands them as incompetent workers and inferior sexual objects. The harassment causes considerable emotional distress. Some women have committed suicide. (Citron 2009, 375)

Online harassment is likely to discourage women from creating video content that may be shared on YouTube, ultimately silencing voices that could benefit others.

YouTube Possibilities

Despite recognition of misogyny and other forms of hostile reception, scholars point to ways YouTube has been utilized by nonprofessionals to share viewpoints that may be excluded from traditional mainstream media outlets. To some degree, independent YouTubers gain popularity as they use the kinds of strategies that are outlined on YouTube’s “Creator Playbook.” This free online resource is designed to help content creators make decisions that will optimize views and subscriber-numbers on the video-sharing site. It includes advice on topics such as creating a coherent channel, using cross-promotion and social media to build a viewing community, and reaching out to viewers for feedback (Creator Playbook). Jenna Mourey, Ryan Higa, and other YouTube performers who have achieved high numbers of subscribers tend to utilize such strategies, though the success of Mourey and Higa came before the Playbook was first published in 2011.

As helpful as the Creator Playbook may be in detailing strategies connected with channel success, it does not provide suggestions for content creators who are subjected to a hostile or threatening reception through viewer comments. The guide also does not acknowledge that women or members of other social groups facing offline social injustices may need advice about handling online interactions where such injustices may be mirrored or exacerbated. In other words, the Creator Playbook treats YouTube performers as if they all have equal opportunities for success, even though qualitative studies—as well as the list of most-subscribed channels—suggest that this is not the case.

In considering useful strategies for women and others facing a hostile reception on YouTube, then, it is necessary to look beyond the general advice offered in the Creator Playbook. However, most of the literature focusing on the use of YouTube to challenge social hierarchies focuses on content creators whose impact is limited, with the scholarship itself aiming to draw attention to YouTube content that is not widely viewed. Among these studies, scholars note challenges to dominant paradigms of masculinity (Peter Lehman 2007), debates about gender in Islam from Muslim and non-Muslim women (Farida Vis, Liesbet Van Zoonen, and Sabina Mihelj 2011), the use of intimacy to promote social change (Lange 2007c), and media production by Black teen girls to negotiate their identities (Carla E. Stokes 2010). While the positive impact of even limited viewership of such videos should not be minimized, these types of studies are not able to offer insights about successfully negotiating hostile reception
in ways that are likely to address the gender imbalance on the list of most-subscribed YouTubers.

The most helpful study of a YouTube performer who has been successful in terms of views and subscriptions despite a somewhat marginal social position is Saul’s (2010) study of KevJumba. A Chinese American teenage YouTuber who often receives racist comments on his videos, KevJumba uses parody to skillfully manage negative comments. However, Saul points out that in doing so, KevJumba “sometimes seems to paradoxically reinscribe the marginalizing discourses of adolescence that he otherwise skillfully contests” (470). While Saul’s study addresses ethnicity rather than gender issues, his findings complement studies of performance and parody in feminist circles.

Attention to gender performance and parody is rooted in Judith Butler’s landmark text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler argues that feminists should not attempt to find “a point of view outside of constructed identities” (187); instead, feminists should “locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions” (188) in order to contest problematic markers of gendered identity. In other words, repetition and parody can be strategically used to disrupt normative gender roles. Such work is important, for as Judith Butler points out in *Undoing Gender* (2004), “a normative conception of gender can undo one’s personhood” (1). Parody has the potential to challenge normative conceptions, as parody “seeks to transform its audience’s consciousness so that it can no longer view the object of parody in the same way ever again” (Susan Burgess 2011, 130).

Butler’s ideas of performativity and parody have been extended (Judith Halberstam 1998; Carrie Paechter 2010) and applied, especially in the analysis of pop culture icons such as Madonna and Lady Gaga (Banet-Weiser 2011; Alexander Cho 2009; Alyx Vesey 2009). In such analyses, researchers find varying degrees of success whereby performers help their own voices to be heard by operating within dominant paradigms, while they also promote positive social change by exaggerating—and thus challenging—accepted norms. These performance strategies highlight the way a person may be “constituted by norms and dependent on them” while also trying “to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to” these norms (Butler 2004, 4).

Altogether, then, research that offers useful strategies for negotiating a hostile YouTube environment while simultaneously increasing viewership and making a potentially positive impact is limited. Resources such as the Creator Playbook offer a general overview of useful strategies without considering barriers to success that content creators from certain social groups might encounter. Scholarship on videos that feature performers from marginalized groups, on the other hand, rarely include those with large viewership. The exception is a study of KevJumba, a YouTuber from a marginalized group who encounters hostility and yet has gained a large viewership. KevJumba’s approach is connected to feminist articulations of performance and parody. That strategy is the most fruitful context for examining the work of Jenna Mourey and her ability to rise to the top of the YouTube rankings despite the negative feedback female performers tend to receive on YouTube.

About Jenna Marbles

“She has more Facebook fans than Jennifer Lawrence, more Twitter followers than Fox News and more Instagram friends than Oprah” (Amy O’Leary 2013). At the time the data for this research were collected (February 2012), “Jenna Marbles’” channel ranked number
one on the list of most-subscribed female YouTube channels and number ten (and the only female channel) on the list of the fifty most-subscribed YouTube channels (VidStatsX). The performer’s real name is Jenna Mourey; she is a twenty-six-year-old native of Rochester, NY, who currently resides in California. She earned a Master’s degree in sports psychology from Boston University.

Mourey joined YouTube on February 16, 2010 and in three short years has been labeled “the woman with 1 billion clicks” by The New York Times (O’Leary 2013). Her first video—a short silent “film” about her now-famous dog “Marbles”—is nothing like her current, more popular videos, which often feature Mourey in front of her camera, providing commentary on or parody of various topics such as relationships, social behavior, and popular culture. For example, Mourey’s first viral video, “How to trick people into thinking you’re good looking,” is a “mock-torial” for women about how to groom themselves. The video has had more than fifty-one million views.

Mourey has produced more than 145 videos, the majority of which resemble her very first viral video. She has amassed millions of subscribers—8,795,816 as of May 15, 2013 (quadruple the number of subscribers since the time of the data collection in February 2012)—and she has more than one billion video views. And, those numbers rise rapidly and earn Mourey a pay day. Because she has monetized her channel, allowing advertising on her videos, sources estimate that Mourey may have earned anywhere from $500,000 to $1 million since she joined YouTube (iJaredTV). These figures do not include income Mourey has generated from the sale of JennaMarbles Merch, products such as tee shirts associated with her channel.

This success has transformed Mourey into an “American entertainer and YouTube personality” (Jenna Marbles). She has been featured in articles by ABC News (Andrea Canning 2011) and The New York Times (Jennifer Conlin 2011; O’Leary 2013). She’s also professionalizing “to handle the deluge of endorsement requests and fan mail,” with recent hires including “a personal assistant, a business manager, her mother, and a soon-to-be-hired chief technical officer” (O’Leary 2013). Currently, Mourey uploads a new video to her YouTube channel every Wednesday.

About Ryan Higa

In order to evaluate the effect of gender on viewer comments, comparing Mourey’s comments with a similar male YouTube performer was important. Ryan Higa was the most appropriate match. Higa joined YouTube in 2006 and started the channel “Nigahiga” with friends Sean Fujiyoshi, Tim Enos, and Tarynn Nago (Ryan Higa a). According to Higa, the name of the channel has Japanese origins; “niga” means “rant” in Mandarin (Tonya TKO). At the time the data for this research were collected (February 2012), “Nigahiga” ranked number two on the list of most-subscribed YouTube channels (VidStatsX). Unlike Mourey, Higa has two YouTube channels. On “Nigahiga,” Higa posts videos on a variety of topics that are comedic in nature and often provide pop-culture parody. On “HigaTV,” which he launched in 2011 as his “personal YouTube channel,” Higa posts a variety of “behind-the-scenes” and “bloopers” footage compiled in the making of the videos posted to “Nigahiga.” For the purpose of this study, researchers analyzed videos and comments from Higa’s primary (and more popular) channel, “Nigahiga.”

Higa was born in Hilo, Hawaii on June 6, 1990. The twenty-two-year-old YouTuber dropped out of college at UNLV, with his parents’ blessing, to pursue his
burgeoning YouTube success \textit{(Nigahiga)}. Though many of his videos feature him solo, plenty of others include collaborations with friends and other YouTube stars, including KevJumba.

Higa has published 152 videos on “Nigahiga,” where he also has amassed 8,051,136 subscribers as of April 2013, with more than 1.4 billion video views. “HigaTV,” where Higa has published only thirty-eight videos as of May 2013, is newer and far less popular, with just more than a million subscribers and fifty-three million video views. Like Mourey, Higa sells merchandise and has monetized his site, earning a paycheck for every click on his videos. In addition, Higa has made appearances on several television and web series \textit{(Ryan Higa b)}, including SupahNinjas on Nickelodeon.

\textbf{Methodology}

In order to explore the intersection of gender and the YouTube environment, the researchers raised two questions:

(1) Is YouTube a more hostile environment for Jenna Marbles, a popular female YouTuber, than for male counterpart, Ryan Higa?

(2) What performance strategies does Jenna Marbles use to navigate the YouTube environment to achieve and maintain a high level of popularity?

Researchers conducted textual analyses of comments posted to two popular YouTubers, one male and one female. Then, close readings of the female YouTuber’s videos were conducted in order to discover what performance strategies she employed.

In order to compare viewers’ responses to male and female YouTube performers, researchers collected and analyzed audience comments posted on the top-ten videos of two popular YouTube performers. Jenna Mourey (a.k.a. JennaMarbles) was chosen because she is the most popular female YouTube performer. Ryan Higa (a.k.a. Nigahiga) was chosen because he is one of the most popular male YouTube performers, with a comedic style that is comparable to that of Jenna Mourey. Mourey ranked number one among females and number ten overall for channel subscriptions. Higa ranked number two for channel subscriptions at the time of data collection. (See Appendices 1 and 2 for the lists of top-ten videos of each performer.)

The most recent one hundred comments were collected on February 4, 2012 from the top-ten videos of Mourey and Higa. The researchers reviewed the comments in order to generate categories that would be useful in discerning the supportive and hostile feedback each YouTuber tends to receive from viewers. Ten types of comments were identified and representative examples were selected to assist in categorizing. These comments were grouped into three types of feedback (supportive, critical/hostile, and omitted from analysis) in order to provide overviews of viewer response for the two YouTube performers (See Figure).

Comments that fit in more than one category were counted more than once. For example, “You’re funny, I’ll admit. But we can do without cutting every five seconds” would be considered both “Compliment: personality of performer” and “Criticism: video content.” In addition, comments that were not understood or that were very difficult to classify were omitted from analysis to avoid classifying them inappropriately.

In addition to comparing types of comments on the top videos of Mourey and Higa, in order to better understand Mourey’s YouTube popularity and success, researchers
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF FEEDBACK</th>
<th>TYPE OF COMMENT</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUPPORTIVE</td>
<td>compliment: video content</td>
<td>“this is really funny”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>compliment: personality of performer</td>
<td>“Damn you are fuckin funny” [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>compliment: appearance of performer</td>
<td>“you have a rockin bod!” [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRITICAL / HOSTILE</td>
<td>criticism: video content</td>
<td>“this is not funny at all”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>criticism: personality of performer</td>
<td>“who is this retard? and why so many views?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>criticism: appearance of performer</td>
<td>“i dont think she’s hot” [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>inappropriate remark: explicitly or aggressively sexual</td>
<td>“are you single, and can i lick you?” [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>inappropriate remark: racist or sexist</td>
<td>“oh my god that accent sounds like crappy american” [sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“This is why ignorant whores like you belong in the fucking kitchen”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMITTED FROM ANALYSIS</td>
<td>spam</td>
<td>“Watch this video!” [with a link attached to a video posted by the commenter]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>incomprehensible or unclassifiable remarks</td>
<td>“I would do the same face at you, and we would look eachother till one of us drop dead. Huh!” [sic].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1**
Comment Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Comments</th>
<th>Jenna Mourey’s Videos N=919</th>
<th>Ryan Higa’s Videos N=888</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical/Hostile comments (total)</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content or personality</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sexist/racist or sexually aggressive</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive comments (total)</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content or personality</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical appearance</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 2**
Comment Results
analyzed her top most-viewed videos in February 2012 (See Appendix 1). Researchers watched the videos twice for emerging categories, or themes, using a qualitative, inductive approach (Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor 2002, 214–215). Once categories were established, researchers reviewed the videos again to further identify and classify the various performance strategies utilized by Mourey in each of her videos.

**Findings**

**Mourey Receives More Critical/Hostile Comments Than Higa**

The majority of responses to the videos of both Ryan Higa and Jenna Mourey are supportive (96 percent and 82 percent, respectively). However, Mourey receives critical/hostile feedback more than four times as often as Higa (4 percent for Higa, 18 percent for Mourey) (see Figure 2).

Furthermore, the kind of critical/hostile feedback and the kind of supportive feedback differ for the two performers. Of the 4 percent critical/hostile feedback Ryan Higa receives, 3 percent of the comments focus on the video content or on Higa’s personality. Most of these responses come from viewers who are offended by Higa’s videos. In one of his top-ten videos, “How to be emo,” Higa parodies emo lifestyles, which some viewers deem offensive. For example, one fan responds, “this is the only video of yours that i don’t like. i’m a self-harmer, and it’s really offensive” [sic] (yoursexytomato). Similarly, in a video that uses song lyrics to parody a conversation leading to domestic violence between Chris Brown and Rihanna, the critical comments tend to focus on domestic violence being a serious issue and not an appropriate subject for humor.

The other 1 percent of critical/hostile feedback Higa receives is categorized as racist. A Hawaiian of mixed descent, Higa has Asian features and a distinct accent. A typical racist comment is “Why the fuck are you famous? Your english is bad just like ur acting ...” [sic] (Steelheartftw). Such comments suggest that even the most popular YouTube performers are subject to harsh and inappropriate responses from viewers at times.

In comparison, Mourey’s critical/hostile feedback is not only more common but also more often includes hater remarks and inappropriate sexual comments. Half of Mourey’s critical/hostile feedback focuses on her video content or personality, while the other half includes sexually explicit or aggressive comments. Typical examples of hater feedback on Mourey’s videos include, “No even remotely funny. What is more pathetic is that people found humor in it” [sic] (yankee9123) and “she’s not much to look at and she’s not even funny” (slickrickyy69). Mourey’s viewers are unlike Higa’s viewers in that they do not seem to be offended by her videos.

Comments categorized as sexually explicit are distinct from hater comments because hater feedback argues that the performer offers nothing of value at all. Sexually explicit feedback, on the other hand, suggests that the value of the performer is in her status as a sexual object or potential sexual partner for the viewer, effectively ignoring the content of the video performance and the personality of the YouTube performer.

This relegation of the YouTube performer to the domain of sexual object is what makes such feedback critical and hostile. An example of a less aggressive comment is: “JennaMarbles, why tan or use self tanner when you can get some color inside of you” (DarkLascivious). A slightly more aggressive comment is “I’d like to grind my cock against you ass . . .” [sic] (lIllllllllllllllllllll). Some of the sexually explicit comments are directed to other
(male) viewers rather than addressing Mourey, such as “any guy on here not wanna bang he hell outta her?” (nocupsinvan). Whether the sexually explicit comments speak to Mourey or about Mourey, the effect is to objectify her. Higa does not receive any comments in this vein. While it might be argued that the racist comments directed at Higa are similar to the sexual comments responding to Mourey’s videos, the numbers are much greater for Mourey, signaling a more hostile reception.

While both performers receive a lot of positive feedback on the content of their videos and their personalities, 7 percent of the commentary directed at Mourey focuses on her physical appearance in complimentary ways, while only 2 percent of the commentary about Higa compliments his physical appearance. In Higa’s case, positive comments about his physical appearance are most likely to appear on his Twilight spoof because he appears as a “hot vampire.”

Overall, as top YouTube performers, both Higa and Mourey receive an overwhelming amount of positive feedback. Still, the critical/hostile responses they receive differ greatly in amount and type: Mourey receives more critical/hostile feedback, and this feedback tends to consist of hater commentary and explicit sexual remarks.

**Videos Successfully Employ Performance Strategies**

Despite the fair amount of critical/hostile comments she typically receives, Mourey continues to post videos to her channel each week, and her popularity continues to grow. In her videos, which are usually composed of social commentary or parody, Mourey employs a variety of performance strategies that mock traditional gender roles and stereotypes yet simultaneously reinforce them.

Mourey mocks traditional gender roles and stereotypes through her use of explicit gender performance, which includes female and male varieties. Explicit gender performance here is understood to mean exaggerated examples of gendered behavior that are performed purposefully and directly labeled (often in the videos’ titles) by Mourey as representing “girl” or “boy” behaviors. For instance, in her top-ten videos (See Appendix 1), Mourey explicitly performs gender in seven of the videos analyzed. One of these parodies “boy” behavior (“What Boys Do on the Internet”), while the other six explicit performances of gender focus on “girl” behavior in various settings or situations.

While Mourey’s parodies mock gender stereotypes, she often employs them to her own advantage. In “How to get ready for a date,” Mourey mocks women who change their appearance and behavior—in essence, objectifying themselves—to win over a potential mate. Yet, to demonstrate her point, Mourey objectifies herself by wearing a tight, pink dress with black high heels and using lots of makeup and accessories, thus embodying the very stereotype she is trying to dispel. In this way, she is making her desired point yet also creating a situation that draws in potential viewers through her use of a “sexy girl” or objectified appearance.

In other videos, like “What Girls Do In The Car” and “What Girls Do On The Internet,” Mourey performs a skit in which she plays the role of the “every girl” and parodies how she behaves in these varying situations. In this way, she is drawing on what might be considered normative female behaviors and using them in performative ways that parody such conventions. For example, she refers to the stereotype that women are bad drivers when she says, “I almost hit a cone,” in “What Girls Do In The Car.” In the same video, she applies lipstick while looking in the rearview mirror and saying in a sing-song voice to
herself, “touchy-upy, touchy-upy.” In such instances, Mourey fits Butler’s (1990) suggestion that extreme gender performances tend to reveal everyday ways that gender performance occurs.

In “What Girls Do On The Internet,” Mourey refers to women’s tendencies to self-deprecate. As she pretends to look at a website on her computer, she says, in voiceover, “Oh, look at that girl’s butt. Her butt looks so good. Why can’t my butt look like that?” Later in the video, she revisits the subject when her character gets hungry. “I’m so hungry. Oh, I want a cake. No, no, no. Think of your butt. Think of your butt,” her character’s conscience mutters.

Mourey not only embodies “femaleness” in her appearance, but also in her manner of speech and behavior in these two parody scenarios, which highlight many of the social and cultural challenges women deal with daily. In these examples, those challenges include dealing with perceptions about female intelligence and driving ability as well as negotiating ideas of body image and beauty.

Mourey also performs male gender explicitly in videos like “What Boys Do On The Internet” and also “What Boys Do In The Car” (though the latter was not in her top ten as of February 2012). In these videos, Mourey ties up her long, blonde hair and hides it beneath a baseball cap. She dresses in male attire and paints a curly black mustache on her face. She talks in a more masculine voice and employs mannerisms and speech patterns that could be considered “typical,” if not exaggerated, behaviors of men. For example, in “What Boys Do On The Internet,” Mourey imitates a man as he surfs the web, looking for sports statistics on ESPN.com first, then quickly making his way to sites containing pornography, at which point Mourey proceeds to simulate male masturbation. In this way, she also serves to highlight male cultural stereotypes as understood through a female perspective.

Yet, beyond these examples of overt gendered performance, Mourey also employs implicit masculine and feminine characteristics and behaviors in almost every one of her videos. Implicit gender performance refers to patterns of speech, behavior, and appearance that are not directly labeled as male or female conventions.

Implicit gender performance is first noticeable in an introductory video screen, which Mourey has used to brand her videos since March 30, 2011. In this introduction, Mourey is seen posing in football pads with a bare midriff, her long blonde hair worn down, and eye black under her eyes. Right from the start, Mourey is projecting an objectified, sexual appeal while simultaneously appearing as “tough” or “masculine” by her chosen attire (and lack thereof).

Furthermore, Mourey typically has a “potty mouth.” She frequently uses foul language and sometimes, in doing so, uses an elevated volume of speech. Mourey has roots in Rochester and Boston, and while she does not use a pronounced accent from either of these locations, she tends to employ the “tough guy” manner of speech that might be considered typical or representative of men in these northeastern cities.

Mourey also frequently uses implicit female performance. Mourey almost always appears in full makeup in her videos and her hair is usually combed neatly. Exceptions to this sometime include videos when she is engaging in parody and purposefully manipulating her appearance to suit the skit, as in “What Girls Do In The Bathroom In The Morning,” which is not included in the top-ten category. She also frequently wears low-cut tops, and is usually shown only from the waist up in the video frame; such framing highlights her physical appearance.

Additionally, at the end of nearly every video, Mourey invites viewers to subscribe to her channel, where she “puts out new videos every Wednesday . . . yeah!” She says this to
viewers in a very feminine, high-pitched, baby-talk voice. She also tends to speak to her dogs, Marbles and Kermit, using this voice whenever they appear in the videos. This kind of speech is often linked to women and is representative of female gender performance.

**Discussion**

Mourey receives more critical/hostile feedback than Higa. Furthermore, the kind of feedback differs. Mourey receives more hater commentary. Both critical/hostile and supportive feedback on Mourey's videos regularly objectify her, with the critical/hostile feedback characterized by sexually explicit and aggressive comments and the supportive feedback consisting of compliments regarding Mourey's physical appearance. The kind of harassment that many researchers note in online environments is thus evident when viewer responses to Mourey's and Higa's videos are compared.

Some of these differences might be attributed to the varying content of Mourey's and Higa's YouTube performances. Mourey discusses gender roles and draws direct attention to her body and appearance more often than Higa, which some might argue accounts for the difference in feedback. However, this content difference should not lead to the hater feedback directed at Mourey; it is a fallacy to assume that drawing attention to the body is an invitation for sexually aggressive comments. Even when considering the content differences in Mourey's and Higa's videos, then, analysis of the comments responding to their videos shows that hostile and objectifying comments tend to be more plentiful for Mourey. These reception differences seem connected to the gender of the YouTube performers.

In response to this environment, Mourey's use of gender performance and parody works to her advantage, especially when she executes such performance explicitly; doing so renders her akin to a character. Her on-screen behaviors, mode of dress, style and cadence of speech, and video content have become patterned over time and therefore expected by viewers in much the same way that audiences expect well-developed characters in other popular media to act in each new performance. These performance strategies allow Mourey to trademark herself; when she breaks from the mold, viewers often make comments about the fact that she has strayed from her typical performance.

Though Mourey appears to be savvy in her execution of each style of gendered performance, she still falls into the traps of traditional gender norms. She appeals to viewers by presenting herself in a very feminine, often objectified, manner even in the instances where she is rebuking the norm with her parodies. The fact that her videos receive more sexually-explicit comments than those of Higa suggests that many viewers watch her videos simply to gaze (Laura Mulvey 1975). This suggests that women on YouTube are treated in much the same way as women in other media platforms (Jennifer Siebel Newsom 2011), raising the question of whether YouTube is suited to women seeking to have their voices heard.

**Conclusions**

This study of gender in the YouTube environment supports research describing harsh responses to women in online venues (Barak 2005; Biber et al. 2002; Citron 2009; Herring et al. 2002; Ratliff 2007) and offers one YouTube performer's approach to sharing her own voice within this environment; the success of her gendered performance allows Mourey to
continue critiquing culture through the production of YouTube videos, while earning a paycheck in the process.

Our findings show that the top female YouTuber receives more negative responses to her videos than her male counterpart. These responses, some of which have a harshly critical or sexually-aggressive tone, create a hostile environment within which Mourey and other members of non-dominant groups operate. Mourey successfully uses performance strategies to negotiate a hostile online environment and, as a result, is meeting with social and financial success. She utilizes both explicit and implicit male and female behaviors in her videos to attract and keep audiences comprising men and women. Her performance serves as a means to capitalize on cultural norms of gender while simultaneously critiquing them.

YouTube and other social media platforms are fertile ground for gender studies and can teach us about recognizing hostile online environments, addressing cyber gender harassment, and coping with both. Mourey provides one example of how women can use gender performance strategies to their advantage to achieve success within video-sharing environments. Future studies of other women like her can suggest additional strategies women can employ to their advantage on YouTube and other social media platforms.

Furthermore, the gender imbalance on YouTube, with only 18 percent of the top most-subscribed channels in February 2012 featuring females, mirrors the representation of women in leadership roles across professional realms, including politics, corporate settings, the entertainment industry, and education (Leslie Bennetts 2012; Martha M. Lauzen 2012; Jennifer E. Manning and Colleen J. Shogan 2012; Rachel Soares, Baye Cobb, Ellen Lebow, Hannah Wisten, Veronica Wojnas, and Allyson Regis 2011; “Women CEOs” 2011). Such consistent imbalances suggest widespread issues. As a space consisting of videos and written text, YouTube lends itself to direct textual analysis that is more difficult when studying gender in various professional contexts. However, future research connecting gender issues across online and offline contexts may be most productive in identifying strategies and interventions that encourage female leadership and the inclusion of diverse voices in professional and popular realms.

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX 1: JENNA MARBLES TOP TEN VIDEOS AS OF 2/4/2012

Jenna Marbles

YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/user/JennaMarbles/videos?sort=p&view=u
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/pages/Jenna-Mourey/311917224927
Twitter: http://twitter.com/Jenna_Marbles
Blog: http://jennamarblesblog.com/
Joined YouTube: February 16, 2010
2,284,676 subscribers
340,469,769 video views

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<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Title of video</th>
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<th>Date posted</th>
<th>Length (min:sec)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“How To Trick People Into Thinking You’re Good Looking”</td>
<td>35,692,165</td>
<td>July 9, 2010</td>
<td>2:37</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“How To Avoid Talking To People You Don’t Want To Talk To”</td>
<td>18,218,246</td>
<td>February 15, 2011</td>
<td>2:47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“What I Would Have Done In Cancun”</td>
<td>14,007,416</td>
<td>March 9, 2011</td>
<td>5:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“What Girls Do On The Internet”</td>
<td>9,826,352</td>
<td>June 15, 2011</td>
<td>2:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“How To Get Ready For A Date”</td>
<td>8,927,003</td>
<td>July 20, 2011</td>
<td>3:06</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>“How Lady Gaga Writes A Song”</td>
<td>8,898,805</td>
<td>July 21, 2010</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>“White Girls At The Club”</td>
<td>8,604,197</td>
<td>September 21, 2011</td>
<td>5:59</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>“What Nicki Minaj Wants In A Man”</td>
<td>8,484,291</td>
<td>May 20, 2011</td>
<td>2:40</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>“What Boys Do On The Internet”</td>
<td>7,876,804</td>
<td>June 22, 2011</td>
<td>2:22</td>
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APPENDIX 2: NIGAHIGA’S TOP TEN VIDEOS AS OF 2/4/12

Nigahiga

YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/user/nigahiga?blend=1&ob=0#p/u
Personal YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/higatv
Website: http://www.higatv.com/
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/higatv
Twitter: http://www.twitter.com/TheRealRyanHiga
Google+: https://plus.google.com/u/0/110616040698721776384/posts
Lindsey Wotanis, PhD, is an assistant professor and director of the journalism program at Marywood University in Scranton, PA. She teaches a variety of news and communications courses. She also serves as adviser to the campus newspaper, The Wood Word, and to the campus chapter of the Society for Collegiate Journalists. Her research interests include community, news, social media, and gender. E-mail: llwotanis@maryu.marywood.edu

Laurie McMillan, PhD, is associate professor of English at Marywood University in Scranton, PA. Her recent publications focus on writing pedagogy, feminism, and rhetoric. She teaches a variety of composition, women’s studies, and literature courses. She became interested in gender dynamics on YouTube through her own recreational vlogging experiences. E-mail: lmcmillan@maryu.marywood.edu

### TABLE A2

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<th>Date posted</th>
<th>Length (min:sec)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“How To Be Gangster”</td>
<td>33,601,494</td>
<td>November 4, 2007</td>
<td>5:24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“How To Be Ninja”</td>
<td>32,437,508</td>
<td>July 25, 2007</td>
<td>5:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“Nice Guys”</td>
<td>30,437,508</td>
<td>May 31, 2011</td>
<td>2:50</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>“How To Be Emo”</td>
<td>28,503,041</td>
<td>November 24, 2007</td>
<td>4:54</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>“The ShamWOOHOO!”</td>
<td>23,940,026</td>
<td>April 10, 2009</td>
<td>0:47</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>“Movies In Minutes—Twilight”</td>
<td>19,681,347</td>
<td>January 21, 2009</td>
<td>4:11</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>“The Ninja Glare”</td>
<td>19,122,513</td>
<td>August 14, 2008</td>
<td>3:47</td>
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