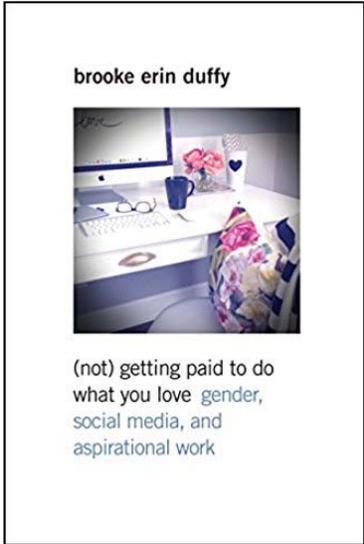


Brooke Erin Duffy, **(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work**, New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2017, 320 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by  
Zoetanya Sujon  
Regent's University London, UK

Beginning with the promise of social media to boost anyone's public visibility and social influence, this much-needed work examines the digital labor conditions of young female Instagrammers, YouTubers, bloggers, and "aspiring" content creators. Brooke Erin Duffy, assistant professor in communications at Cornell University and author of *Remake, Remodel: Women's Magazines in the Digital Age* (2011), is well placed to provide insights into this demographic and growing industry. For **(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work**, Duffy interviewed more than 50 young women and conducted fieldwork at numerous events such as fashion blogging "boot camps," retail launches, fashion conferences, and New York Fashion Week (pp. x–xi). Based on this extensive research, Duffy accomplishes two aims. First, Duffy examines and documents an important and recently emerged sector of the digital economy. Second, Duffy proposes "aspirational labor" as a theoretical lens for understanding this sector's working conditions and its highly gendered nature. Both of these ambitious aims address a gap in current scholarship and are widely relevant for students, academics, and practitioners, particularly those content producers who want to better understand their work and social media as a broader industry.



The book is structured in seven main parts, two of which outline the theoretical foundation and scope for this research. In addition, the preface outlines the methods and context, and an epilogue extends aspirational labor to Duffy's own experience of aspirational labor in academia. The two primarily theoretical chapters include "Entrepreneurial Wishes and Career Dreams" and "The Aspirational Ethos: Gender, Consumerism, and Labor," each of which outlines the historical precedents and conceptual foundations for aspirational labor. The theoretical framing is original and provocative, both supported by and through the empirical findings. The remaining five chapters examine key empirical themes, including social media production (chapter 3), authenticity (chapter 4), sponsors and brands (chapter 5), the myth of entrepreneurial glamour (chapter 6), and the (in)visibility of aspirational labor (chapter 7)— all themes that are characteristic of feminized labor.

In chapter 1, Duffy introduces the context for her work. Although high-profile superinfluencers across social media evoke the promise of success for anyone, Duffy claims that only 8% of bloggers make enough money through blogging to support themselves, and six-figure earners are much rarer (p. 16). Behind the small percentage of highly paid and highly visible influencers are "legions" of often unpaid "enterprising digitally networked young people" who commit their lives to passion projects (p. 4). Duffy's

argument is built around understanding the meaning of this phenomenon, articulated as a form of aspirational labor and defined as

a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love*. As both a practice and a worker ideology, aspirational labor shifts content creators' focus from the present to the future, dangling the prospect of a career where labor and leisure coexist. Indeed, aspirational laborers expect that they will *one day* be compensated for their productivity—be it through material rewards or social capital. But in the meantime, they remain suspended in the consumption and promotion of branded commodities. (pp. 4–6, emphasis in original)

Distinct from “venture labor,” which shares a similar entrepreneurialism across the digital economy, aspirational labor directly acknowledges the promise of future upward mobility and better cultural capital as the primary motivator for social media content creators (p. 23; Neff, 2012; Robinson, 2017). However, Duffy also makes clear that aspirational labor is not new. Instead, aspirational labor is rooted in the gendered nature of consumption, made visible through the archetypal figures of “Mr. Breadwinner and Mrs. Consumer,” which date back to the Victorian era. These pervasive archetypes influenced social norms and everyday behavior while also emphasizing the symbolic link between material goods and social status (pp. 16–17; de Grazia & Furlough, 1996).

While Duffy situates her work within debates around digital labor, she also argues that aspirational laborers are not cultural dupes; instead, they “approach social media creation with *strategy, purpose, and aspirations of career success*” (p. 48, emphasis in original). Indeed, aspirational workers must be fluent in social media metrics, as the number of comments, likes, and follows are the new currency. Developing audiences and followers takes dedication and literacy. Once social media content creators are able to reach a certain number, often in the tens of thousands, much coveted brand partnerships and sponsorships become possible. Social media content creators' strategic approach to their passion projects shows a seductive “business logic” at work in driving social media work and content creation (p. 78). Duffy draws notable connections between this kind of aspirational labor in fashion blogging, Instagramming, and YouTubing and the feminization of social media more broadly.

Duffy paints a rich and detailed picture of her respondents' lives as content creators, aspiring for a life where work and leisure are both defined by passion but also by invisible labor, increased precarity, and constant pressure to perform (p. 211). Indeed, there is a certain urgency about the content of this research and its focus on the reemergence of a young, feminized class marked by aspirational labor. Throughout the book, the importance of this research for understanding the culture and economics of social media resonated with every word. Without a doubt, this excellent book provides a historically informed analysis of a new era of cultural production.

However, although this is a well-focused study on the relatively narrow realm of aspirational labor in fashion and social media, it raises many questions about the extent to which aspirational labor applies across sectors. In addition, how unique is aspirational labor within the media and creative

industries more broadly? Reality television shares numerous commonalities: Cast members must balance self-promotion and authenticity along with the promise of fame for the “work” of being visible as an “ordinary” person (Ouellette, 2017). In these ways, reality television is highly feminized and provides a similar aspirational promise of social mobility, celebrity, and fortune (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). In addition, celebrity culture and the bright shiny promise of fame are threaded throughout all kinds of creative labor, and this could be integrated more clearly into the analytic frame, particularly in terms of how respondents understand celebrity and strive for future visibility (Rojek, 2016; Turner, 2014). Although the epilogue does make connections to aspirational labor in academia, it seems that the broader context and application of aspirational labor falls a bit short. Certainly, this research opens up many questions, and future research in this area is worth seriously considering.

The other notable absence is symbolic power. Although Duffy addresses Bourdieu’s notions of social and cultural capital (pp. 22–23), there is no mention of the role of symbolic power and how it might intersect with or inspire aspirational labor. The capacity to shape and construct realities (Couldry, 2003; Thompson 1995), and to be seen as someone with that kind of power, is arguably an important component of aspirational labor and of the representational frames associated with their content. In this sense, symbolic power is an important component not only of aspirational labor but also of the representational practices and circuits unfolding through the work of social media content creation.

Overall, this is an original and compelling book, clearly examining the influencer industry in the fashion and beauty sector. Brooke Erin Duffy has conducted extensive research, carefully engaged her respondents, and dedicated her careful analysis to understanding those respondents and their work as part of the social media and digital economy. This book is particularly helpful for those studying social media, gender, and the digital economy, and opens up many questions about media industries, aspirational labor, and the merging of creative expression and entrepreneurial ideologies.

### References

- Couldry, N. (2003). The paradox of media power. In N. Couldry & J. Curran (Eds.), *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world* (pp. 3–16). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- De Grazia, V., & Furlough, E. (Eds.). (1996). *The sex of things: Gender and consumption in historical perspective*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Duffy, B. E. (2011). *Remake, remodel: Women's magazines in the digital age*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Neff, G. (2012). *Venture labor: Work and the burden of risk in innovative industries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ouellette, L. (Ed.). (2017). *A companion to reality television*. West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons.

Robinson, L. (2017). Venture labor, media work, and the communicative construction of economic value: Agendas for the field and critical commentary. Entrepreneuring the good life? *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 2017–2021. Retrieved from <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4551/2021>

Rojek, C. (2016). *Presumed intimacy: Parasocial interaction in media, society and celebrity culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Skeggs, B., & Wood, H. (2012). *Reacting to reality television: Performance, audience and value*. London, UK: Routledge.

Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Turner, G. (2014). *Understanding celebrity* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.