

LIVING FOR YOUTUBE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRANKVSPRANK CHANNEL

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A MRP

presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the program of

Literatures of Modernity

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

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LIVING FOR YOUTUBE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRANKVSPRANK CHANNEL

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This major research paper aims to analyze the deteriorative effects of *YouTube's* demand for performative authenticity coupled with its algorithmic model of compensation. Through a case study of *PrankvsPrank's* Jesse and Jeana, this paper will identify the various critical factors that contributed to both the couple's onscreen success and offscreen romantic failure. More specifically, it will dissect the various ways in which the pressure to maintain and increase subscribers, 'likes' and account monetization revenue erodes the values ordinarily sacred within healthy, long-term, romantic relationships. Through engaging in regular acts of self-disclosure and performative authenticity onscreen, Jesse and Jeana were able to foster and leverage the illusion of a genuinely reciprocal (parasocial) relationship with their viewers. Over time, however, the constant and consistent demand for identity work extended beyond their onscreen performance and into every facet of their daily lives—eventually taking precedence over their romantic relationship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and thank my amazing supervisor, Dr. Jason Boyd, without whom this major research paper would have been impossible. I wish to express my deepest gratitude for the countless hours he has poured into this project and the invaluable insight he has provided. I cannot express enough how much his unwavering support and guidance has assisted me throughout this process. Under his guidance, what initially began as a mere thought in passing developed into the major research paper here today.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank my second reader, Dr. Colleen Derkatch, who so graciously took on this readership in the latter half of the previous semester. Her fresh pair of eyes and rhetorical approach to theory has lent me another lens through which I could view my topic.

Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Elizabeth Podnieks for being a consistent source of inspiration and support throughout my time at Ryerson Universit

Over the last decade, as *YouTube* rose in prominence and grew in popularity as a video-sharing platform, so too did its leading content creators (Jerslav 5234-5235). Caught somewhere between DIY reality stars and Hollywood celebrities, these ostensibly ‘ordinary’ individuals calculatedly leverage their ‘amateur’ status to amass cultish followings and with that, launch and sustain lucrative media enterprises. Through broadcasting elements of their everyday lives online, YouTubers—and particularly vloggers—successfully build entire careers around simply “being themselves”. In the case of *PrankvsPrank*’s Jesse and Jeana, the New Jersey couple were able to amass 19 million subscribers across their two channels in the course of seven years. From November 2009 to May 2016, Jesse and Jeana released one hundred and seventy-one prank videos (averaging two minutes each) on their main channel and one thousand seven hundred and thirty-nine daily vlogs on their vlog channel, *GFvsBF*. Although their content consists primarily of prank videos and BTS footage, their dynamic as a real-life couple attracted scores of subscribers who tuned in for their seeming relatability and authenticity. As time went on, however, it became apparent that their increasing success online had a negative effect on their romantic relationship offline. Seven years after releasing their first video, during what would appear to be the height of their career, Jesse and Jeana released their final video as a couple. In that video, the two announced their breakup and attributed their romantic failure to the mounting pressures associated with maintaining their online success.

In an effort to better understand how this situation may have occurred, this paper will explore the deteriorative effects of *YouTube*’s demand for performative authenticity coupled with its algorithmic model of compensation. More specifically, it will dissect the various ways in which the pressure to maintain and increase subscribers, ‘likes’ and account monetization revenue erodes the values ordinarily sacred within healthy, long-term, romantic relationships. To

understand how the video-sharing platform eroded Jesse and Jeana's genuine, offscreen relationship, this paper will detail the couple's ascension to *YouTube* celebrity status and identify the various critical factors that contributed to both their online success and offline romantic failure. As *YouTube* has a relatively low barrier to entry, the video-sharing platform is oversaturated with content produced by amateur content creators. To set themselves apart from the masses, YouTubers like Jesse and Jeana attempt to foster parasocial relationships with their viewers by engaging in regular acts of self-disclosure and performative authenticity. Over time, this constant demand for consistent identity work extends beyond the creator's onscreen performance and into every facet of their daily lives. This effect is further exacerbated when the content creator in question is a vlogger as they are required—by definition—to interact with their viewers as their most 'authentic' self. However, as their viewers' perception of their 'authentic' onscreen self is undoubtedly different than their true, authentic offscreen self, this creates an inconsistency (in identity) that the creator must actively and continuously work at reconciling. When coupled with the financial compensation that accompanies successful *YouTube* videos, it only makes sense that the pressure to perform may prove too much for any one individual; never mind a couple.

In the case of *PrankvsPrank*'s Jesse and Jeana, the New Jersey-based couple was launched into the spotlight when their debut YouTube video, "Girlfriend Fake Head in Bed Scare Prank", went viral. Uploaded on November 10th, 2009, the two-minute video promptly amassed millions of views despite neither Jesse nor Jeana having a pre-existing following online. While it is unclear whether the couple filmed this prank with the explicit goal of uploading it onto *YouTube*, the video demonstrated an element of vulnerability and realness that resonated with many of its viewers. In it, Jesse films himself placing a severed mannequin head next to his

sleeping girlfriend, Jeana. When she awakes to find it inches from her face, she recoils, screams and falls out of bed. In that moment, she instinctively calls out for Jesse as she had not yet realized that he was responsible for the severed head. His laughter, however, gave him away and it wasn't long before Jeana realized that it was just a prank. As this signaled that there was no real danger, Jeana approached the head and discovered that it belonged to a mannequin—not a human. At this point, the good-natured Jeana is depicted laughing alongside Jesse and asking him where he had gotten the severed head. While the rawness of her reaction was an undeniable source of attraction for the viewers, the comment section indicated that much of that attraction stemmed from *how* she reacted. One comment in particular states, “She’s so cool. My wife would have just stabbed me with scissors until she calmed down” (Atkins). Echoing the same sentiment, another commenter writes, “What a cool chick...kudos to her for having a good sense of humor!” (NorthcountryHermit). Evidentially, Jesse and Jeana’s dynamic as a real-life, fun-loving couple resonated with their audience and acted as a source of encouragement for sustained viewership.

Following the success of this first video, Jesse and Jeana continued to release multiple videos of them pranking one another. While the first two were exclusively comprised of Jesse pranking Jeana, the couple quickly realized they could significantly increase their view count by curating content in response to viewer feedback. As the majority of viewer comments expressed an appreciation for Jesse’s boldness and Jeana’s good-humoured nature, the two seemingly leveraged this feedback by playing up those characteristics in subsequent videos. While this act of identity reconstruction may have operated on a subconscious level at the time, it is undeniable that both Jesse and Jeana were motivated to produce content in accordance with what they believed their viewers wanted to see. Consequently, by the third video, Jeana had inadvertently

instigated the public prank war that later became synonymous with the *PrankvsPrank* brand. Lasting only one minute and forty-three seconds, “Girlfriend Scares the Hell Out of Sleeping Boyfriend” cleverly paid homage to their debut video by reversing the roles of the pranker and the pranked. Instead of following the one prank structure of their first two videos, this third video consisted of three separate pranks—all of which demonstrate Jeana’s revenge as she startles a sleeping Jesse on three separate occasions. Through this video, viewers can see the first glimpse of the retaliatory escalation that Jesse and Jeana replicate in every video thereafter. Evidentially, while content creators like Jesse and Jeana may appear to have executive control over their content and channels, their productions are never wholly outside the realm of viewer influence.

In the context of *YouTube*—a video-sharing platform accessible to content creators of all levels—the relatively low barrier to entry creates an extremely diverse online community comprised of both amateurs and professionals alike. Due to the enormity of this network, the *YouTube* platform has a levelling effect that reduces all content creators to the same position upon entry. As their success is largely dictated by content exposure and viewer interests, their ability to appeal to the YouTube algorithm is what ultimately makes their content discoverable and sets them apart from the rest. Within this community, there is simultaneously no intentional curatorial authority (seemingly) and a rigidly defined hierarchy. In theory, regardless of age, educational background, wealth, country of origin and sex, everyone and anyone can rise to the top. In this model, the only markers of success appear to be the view count on individual videos and the subscription count for a channel. On *YouTube*, all users are required to create a channel if they want to upload content or interact with others via the comment section (below a video). In order to follow their favourite content creators and receive real-time updates about new content, users can enable post notifications by ‘subscribing’ to a channel. As such, the subscription count

is a direct reflection of a YouTuber's popularity on the platform. Similarly, the view count is a reflection of a video's popularity as it tells users how many times that specific video has been viewed. While there are multiple contributing factors for why so much significance has been placed on the view count and the subscription count, they can all be traced back to the structural composition of *YouTube* itself.

At its roots, *YouTube* is a video-sharing platform structured by an underlying network of intricate relationships, algorithms, and parasocial interactions. Parasocial interactions are voluntary interactions that are “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible to mutual development” (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Although this concept is not an exact descriptor for the interactions on *YouTube*, much of Horton and Wohl's theory still applies. The concept of parasocial interaction was coined to explain the perceived relationship and interactions that exist between a consumer and the subject of the media they are consuming. In simpler terms, Horton and Wohl describe parasocial interactions as the one-way relationship that exists between a movie-star and a movie-viewer or a radio personality and a radio listener. Despite the fact that the flow of information and communication is one-directional, certain consumers will engage with these personalities as if they are well-acquainted. One example of this can be seen in the way that certain individuals interact with radio personalities, talk show hosts and celebrities. When these individuals encounter media personalities in real-life and online, they tend to conduct themselves as if they are in a genuinely reciprocal relationship (Rubin and Rubin 1985). These audience members may speak to them in a familiar manner or divulge information that one would not ordinarily divulge to someone with whom they are not well acquainted. This occurrence is a testimony to the existence of a parasocial relationship as

the audience member in question feels an intimate connection with the respective media personality.

This effect is only amplified on *YouTube* as the line of communication flows both ways. Due to the interactive nature of its structural composition, *YouTube* not only allows for but invites viewer feedback via the “like” and “dislike” buttons as well as the comment section of a video. In this instance, the viewer is granted direct access to the content creator as the creators often read the comment section, assess video analytics and make on-screen appeals for further viewer feedback. As the barrier to entry on *YouTube* is relatively low, the video-sharing platform is saturated with content and producers know they must foster parasocial relationships to grow their channel and secure a substantial following. These creators know that if they want to stand out, it is in their best interest to engage their viewership and create the illusion of a reciprocal relationship. Oftentimes, this results in the media personalities invoking visual cues to artificially replicate the experience of a face-to-face interaction (Labrecque 136). From speaking directly to the camera to performing in a way that appears to be responsive (i.e. pausing to give the viewer time to think or anticipating questions), many content creators will “break the fourth wall” to create the illusion of situational unity and emotional intimacy (Ferchaud et al. 90). This way, they are better able to strengthen the parasocial relationship as the audience is made to feel as if there is a degree of reciprocity in their “shared” experience.

In the context of vloggers, like *PrankvsPrank*’s Jesse and Jeana, the couple almost always broke the fourth wall as they would regularly address their viewers and make appeals for feedback: “Please always thumbs up the video because it means a lot to me and it actually helps. And maybe leave a comment if you have a little extra time” (I Found This in the PVP House). Since Jeana is appealing directly to her viewers for help, she is intensifying the parasocial

interaction as her viewers are made to feel as if they are actively contributing to the relationship. The act of viewership then transforms from a passive act of consumption to an actively reciprocal exchange. Beyond the appeals for viewer feedback, Jesse and Jeana further invoked the illusion of a parasocial relationship by regularly asking viewers to choose sides in their ongoing prank war. Having established this war early in their *YouTube* career—through the retaliatory third video where Jeana first pranks Jesse—their viewers are made to feel as if they have been on the couple's *YouTube* and prank journey all along. By asking their viewers to choose sides in an ongoing conflict, Jesse and Jeana are cleverly increasing the incentive for sustained viewership as the viewers are now personally invested in their feud.

Much of their appeal, however, stems from the perceived authenticity afforded by their status as a real-life couple filming and uploading amateur prank videos onto *YouTube*; all of which are presented as being done foremost for the couple's own entertainment. According to Ferchaud et al., multiple researchers have identified authenticity as a critical component of achieving successful parasocial interactions (Rubin and Rubin 1985; Levy 1979). If the media personality in question is perceived as disingenuous, the allure of formulating a relationship—parasocial or not—is subsequently diminished. For everyone knows that one cannot establish a truly meaningful relationship with a character that does not actually exist. In the context of *YouTube* and the greater digital world, the significance of authenticity can be traced back to the earlier DIY ideals of internet culture (Garcia-Rapp 122). Within this culture, the belief is that by definition, amateur content must necessarily be more authentic than other forms of mass-produced media (Banet-Weiser 2012; Burgess and Green 2009a, 2009b; Marwick 2013a). As *YouTube* is a video-sharing platform primarily composed of amateur productions, *YouTube*

creators themselves are—by default—perceived as more authentic and relatable than their mainstream counterparts.

This belief is further advanced by the revelatory nature of *YouTube* and its subsequent normalization of self-disclosure to the masses. Self-disclosure is critical to the formation of authentic parasocial relationships as it is similarly integral in the formation of genuine interpersonal relationships. Since parasocial relationships mimic interpersonal relationships, it only makes sense that whatever strengthens interpersonal relationships would also necessarily strengthen the illusion and formation of parasocial relationships (Ferchaud et al. 2017; Cozby 1973). According to Sonja Utz (2015), the act of self-disclosure does not necessarily need to be intimate to foster an authentic parasocial relationship. Rather, it can be positive and entertaining or neutral and even negative. For the most part, the greater the degree of self-disclosure within a relationship, the greater the amount of emotional investment (Ferchaud et al. 91). When applied to YouTubers, it appears that those who partake in frequent acts of self-disclosure are able to foster a closer parasocial relationship with their viewers and subsequently, invoke a reciprocal act of self-disclosure from their viewers by the comment section.

In keeping with this logic, Ferchaud et al.'s research study found that vlogs like Jesse and Jeana's were "more likely than any other video genre to be associated with the presence of all three types of self-disclosure [positive, neutral and negative]" (93). Similarly, Ferchaud et al. also found that self-disclosure was positively associated with higher levels of perceived authenticity. This is consistent with the earlier analysis of the feedback under Jesse and Jeana's first videos, as many viewers expressed an appreciation for the rawness of the couple's reactions and their fun-loving dynamic. Evidentially, Jesse and Jeana's viewers were drawn to their complex on-screen identity as a romantic pair who genuinely love one another but also love to

antagonize and annoy one another. This sentiment is captured perfectly in the following comment as well as the countless others resembling it: “[It’s] sweet. I thought he was going to strangle her but he went to protect her, holding her and turning to face the enemy. But he [totally] flipped after waking up...haha” (Balcha). Taken from the comment section of their “*Girlfriend scares the hell out of sleeping boyfriend*” video, this comment demonstrates that much of Jesse and Jeana’s appeal stems from their perceived authenticity as a real-life couple and the subsequent authenticity of the pranks they film.

Alternatively, vloggers like Jesse and Jeana must also be careful not to over or under divulge as both can be perceived as a disingenuous performance of authenticity. In the context of *YouTube*, where countless content creators attempt to establish a following and distinguish themselves from the masses, viewers are all too aware that what may be perceived as authenticity is often the product of a carefully crafted performance. And in that sense, celebrity—both online and offline—can be understood as “an organic and ever-changing performative practice” (Boyd 140). Although *YouTube* celebrity is comparable to traditional celebrity in many ways, one particularly notable difference can be seen in their unique treatment of private versus public life. While much of the appeal of traditional celebrities stems from the secrecy shrouding their private lives, YouTubers often achieve celebrity status by blurring the division between their private and public lives (Ferchaud et al. 2017; Jerslev 2016). In doing so, they strategically invoke instances of self-disclosure to solidify the authenticity of their on-screen personas.

As previously mentioned, this on-screen presentation and amalgamation of public versus private life is what initially drew viewers to Jesse and Jeana’s *YouTube* channel. Their viewers know that there is ultimately an “unknowable, yet persistently desirable” authentic self beneath their on-screen personas but they do not know the degree to which the two differ. As such, they

continuously consume and analyze Jesse and Jeana's content to seek out inconsistencies across their onscreen and offscreen identities as both individuals and as a couple. Their authenticity online, however, is aided by their vlogger status as the very definition of that title necessitates a degree of self-disclosure and free-flowing dialogue. To quote Tolson, much of the authenticity established through vlogging can be attributed to the "excessive direct address", "the sheer volume and immediacy of 'conversational' responses" and the "transparent amateurishness" of it all (286). This is especially apparent in Jesse and Jeana's vlogs as the former couple regularly addressed their audience, appealed for feedback and encouraged viewers to join in their feud via the comment section. In one of her post-breakup vlogs, Jeana echoes this sentiment when she says, "make sure you guys are commenting which of these ideas you really want to see because the more I see it, the more I'll be like okay, I'll do that video" (I Found this in the PVP House). While this vlog was filmed and released after her separation from Jesse, it perfectly encapsulates the interpersonal attributes employed by vloggers to foster and strengthen their parasocial relationships. Like many others, Jesse and Jeana used a combination of self-disclosure and interpersonal cues to validate their onscreen personas as an authentic representation of the self.

Ironically, it is this same practice which invited viewers into their private, off-screen relationship and granted them the authority to pass judgment on what it ought and ought not to entail. As this on-screen authentic self is ultimately a performative act shaped by viewer feedback, so too is the offline identities on which it is based. In order to better understand how identity is performative both on and offline, it is critical to examine Butler's 1989 theory of performativity. Although this theory was initially formulated in regard to gender identity, the governing principles are also applicable to the construction of personal identity (as a whole). Butler's theory of performativity states that identity and subjectivity are never fixed but rather

constantly undergoing formation and transformation. In that sense, identities are always in a perpetual state of “becoming” and that “becoming” is made up of a sequence of acts which then retroactively informs the identity (Cover 178). Identity can be understood as an “expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (Butler xiv). For example, while Jesse and Jeana’s onscreen identity as a fun-loving couple initially stemmed from their debut video, the feedback under that video undoubtedly informed their behaviour in subsequent videos. As the couple was motivated by the chase for views and content, they consciously and subconsciously responded to viewer feedback by playing into the onscreen personas they were ascribed. Over time, as this performative act of identity work was repeated, it became ingrained in the couple’s perception of the self and ultimately, accepted as a manifestation of the self. Traditionally, however, identity is understood as the root cause from which actions arise rather than the product of a continuous sequence of actions, attitudes and behaviours.

To quote Butler, “what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (Butler xv). Although she was speaking specifically about gender identity when she made this remark, it is evident that one’s perception of their identity is also often taken as an internal feature of the self. In the case of *PrankvsPrank*’s Jeana, she was catapulted to fame due to her good-humoured nature and thus, believed herself to be the laid-back, fun-loving girlfriend that everyone saw her as. Throughout her time on *YouTube*, she upheld and actively played into that identity by carrying herself in a way that she believed best reflected that onscreen identity. While this was not immediately obvious to her at the time, she later addressed the toxicity of performative authenticity and identity work on several occasions. In fact, both her and Jesse identified *YouTube*’s demand for consistent and constant performativity as a

contributing factor to the dissolution of their relationship. As their channel and following grew on *YouTube*, they felt mounting pressure to maintain the same identities—both individually and as a couple—that initially drew their viewers in. Aside from limiting their growth as individuals, this also stunted the growth of their relationship as it was always in thrall to the image they initially promoted to their viewers. As consistency is believed to be a marker of authenticity, Jesse and Jeana had to work around the clock to maintain a sense of continuity across their onscreen and offscreen identities. Evidentially, identity and authenticity are not objective nor set. Rather, it is performative and undergoes constant recontextualization as individuals go about modifying and restructuring their identities in accordance with their various social worlds.

While performativity is demanding both online and offline, the structural composition of *YouTube* further increases the demand for authentic, digital representations of the self. As with most other social media networks, *YouTube* has a way of memorializing content and online user identities. Through a combination of performative authenticity and self-expression, vloggers like Jesse and Jeana inadvertently create a digital rendering of a “self” that may have never previously existed. Within this model, it is extremely difficult to reconcile inconsistencies in identity as the visual rendering of a digital record makes it impossible to dismiss or deny an incongruous representation of the self. “Online social networking [then] is not a singular activity but a set of interrelated—sometimes incompatible—interactivities” (Cover 178). It greatly intensifies the requirement for consistent representations of the self as users must work even harder to perform a coherent and intelligent selfhood that extends temporally across both the digital and physical worlds. While Cover’s work on performing identity online is specific to presentations of the self on Facebook and Myspace, many aspects of his theory are applicable to the analysis of performativity on *YouTube*. As all three social media networks allow users to

exchange information and form relationships via an online presentation of the self, perceived authenticity and consistency in identity is critical to the occurrence of meaningful social interactions.

Echoing Butler's earlier sentiments, Cover believes that there is no "core, essential self from which behaviours and actions emerge" online (180). The ongoing process of identity configuration can never be complete as the acting agent is constantly altering their behaviours to respond to the external world. This can be observed throughout the entirety of Jesse and Jeana's career on *YouTube* as the couple continuously augmented their onscreen personas in accordance with viewer feedback. While they started out broadcasting randomized aspects of their private lives, their videos quickly became a careful curation of what they believed their viewers wanted to see. Over time, as their viewer's preference became more evident, Jesse and Jeana began broadcasting private details and elements that they never would've before: "if you keep reading something or seeing it, it kind of conforms your thought and makes [you] make decisions based on how to make [your audience] happy" (A New Chapter). Evidently, as they themselves make up the entirety of their brand, their identities became a mere commodity through which social and financial wealth could be achieved. And while the couple had already achieved considerable success at the time, the maintenance of that success required an ongoing effort to perform authenticity and uphold the online identities they had established.

As they grew in popularity and influence on *YouTube*, the insatiable demand for content left the couple little time to be their true authentic, everyday selves. Since their individual identities are influenced and shaped by audience feedback, so too is their joint identity as a couple. Their growth and development as a romantic pairing is then—to an extent—limited by what their viewers believe their identities ought to entail. This demand for audience satisfaction

via performative authenticity and self-disclosure is only further complicated by their dependence on the platform as a primary source of income. Since *YouTube* had become a full-time career, Jesse and Jeana felt mounting pressures to perform their onscreen identities as they knew that the view count under their videos corresponded directly with the amount of financial compensation they would receive each month. While most couples need only to concern themselves with satisfying one another, Jesse and Jeana's commodification of their relationship meant that their interactions no longer existed within a vacuum. As with the prank videos on their main channel, Jesse and Jeana knew that filming and uploading their daily lives could be extremely lucrative if they could replicate and convey the same complex onscreen dynamic through their daily vlogs. With every new vlog and video uploaded, the two are inadvertently inviting more and more voyeurs to comment and partake in their private relationship. As their livelihoods are dependent on the sustained engagement and support of those viewers, the ways in which their relationship develops is largely dependent on how each interaction will be received online. This effect is only further amplified when Jesse and Jeana transitioned from casual vloggers to daily vloggers. While casual vloggers have the luxury of recording and uploading at their leisure, daily vloggers must hold themselves to a higher standard as their success on *YouTube* is wholly dependent on their ability to pump out "quality" entertainment at lightning speed. As such, this transition increased the aforementioned effects by tenfold as the previously infrequent work of performing authenticity online now extends through every facet of their daily lives.

To quote Jesse himself, "the weight of our relationship is the weight of our careers. It's the weight of our whole lives and that pressure is not good for a relationship" (A New Chapter). As the couple transitioned from part-time to full-time YouTubers, their content performance was no longer merely indicative of their social success. It became their primary source of income and

thus, a direct reflection of their financial success. To make matters worse, *YouTube*'s low barrier to entry meant that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of videos uploaded every single day. For Jesse and Jeana, this meant that they had to work extra hard to ensure that their videos would receive maximum exposure and stand out from the rest. While having a sizeable following on *YouTube* helps, the algorithm is what ultimately dictates which videos get promoted (or "recommended") and which get buried. As this algorithm is largely unknown and constantly in flux, Jesse and Jeana were repeatedly referencing previous videos and augmenting their performance in ways that—they believed—would maximize exposure and profitability. This then greatly increased the importance of performative authenticity and identity as their livelihoods were wholly dependent on their viewer's perception of them.

In the earliest days of their *YouTube* career, Jesse and Jeana's content was primarily comprised of short, homestyle videos with extremely low production values. As the majority of the videos only lasted between one to two minutes, it required very little time and effort to compose. In addition to the mediocre camera quality, the simplicity and brevity of the earlier pranks meant that there was little very editing and variation in framing. In that sense, the pressure to produce and perform had not yet fully set in. However, a quick analysis of their video titles reveal that, while *YouTube* was clearly more of a hobby than a career at the time, Jesse and Jeana were already playing to an audience. With titles like "Hot Chick Undressing Prank" and "Frog Down Hot Girl's Cleavage", Jesse and Jeana were paying homage to the age-old adage "sex sells". As a conventionally attractive couple, they knew that commodifying themselves (both individually and as a couple) was the best way to distinguish their content from the rest. On a platform like *YouTube*, where thousands of videos are uploaded every single day, it is extremely difficult for new content creators to gain any amount of recognition. As such,

Youtubers like Jesse and Jeana strategically title their videos in an attempt to get picked up by the algorithm and posted to the homepage.

At the time, the best way of doing so was through a combination of intriguing video titles and eye-catching thumbnails. For example, the video “Hot Chick Undressing Prank” was accompanied by a blurry thumbnail depicting what appeared to be Jeana unhooking her bra from the back. While the real target of this prank was the viewers who believed they would see Jeana undressing in this video—she does not—its title and composition was clearly the product of much thought and consideration. Evidentially, the decision to use that specific title and thumbnail sprung from an awareness of their attractiveness and a subsequent attempt to capitalize on that attractiveness. Beyond leveraging their physical appearance and romantic relationship, Jesse and Jeana also frequently employed shock value when titling their videos. With titles like “Hot Girlfriend Electric Fence Prank” and “Girl Duct Taped to Bed”, Jesse and Jeana are intentionally playing on the curiosity of viewers by presenting their videos in a seemingly bizarre light. While these titles may lead viewers to form certain expectations for the video content, the subject matter is rarely a literal reflection of the title. More often than not, the impression given by a title or a thumbnail is wholly different from the video itself. As this practice of click-baiting is extremely commonplace on *YouTube*, it is often employed by content creators like Jesse and Jeana.

Beyond using click-bait to attract viewers, Jesse and Jeana also regularly augmented their content and performance to reflect trends in pop-culture. For instance, their video, “Hot Girlfriend Waxes Guido’s Hairy Legs,” was released around the height of *Jersey Shore*’s popularity. As one of the most successful reality shows in 2009, *Jersey Shore* followed the lives of eight attractive, young, Italian Americans living in Jersey shore. As Jesse and Jeana were also

based out of New Jersey, they knew they could bandwagon onto the show's success by invoking the terms commonly associated with the program—one of which is 'guido'. However, while their ascension on *YouTube* began with some seemingly harmless clickbait, the insatiable demand for content and views led to a toxic escalation in the pranks. Having established a sizeable and loyal following, Jesse and Jeana felt the constant pressure to perform and produce. Due to *YouTube*'s low barrier to entry and the subsequent oversaturation of content, Jesse and Jeana knew they could not maintain their success without regularly uploading content. This is especially problematic for the couple as the nature of their content meant that they could not produce new videos without escalating the pranks depicted onscreen.

Over time, as they recorded more and more videos, it became increasingly difficult to execute original pranks that would catch the target off-guard. This meant that the couple had to get creative and execute their pranks at times the other would never expect. As such, Jesse and Jeana were forced to venture into the ordinarily sacred territories within a romantic relationship—there were no longer any limits as to how and where a prank could be executed. While the couple initially started out filming harmless pranks, the gradual escalation of those pranks led to the eventual breakdown and dissolution of their romantic relationship. Their pranks were no longer juvenile in nature but rather emotionally manipulative and intentionally deceptive. From fake proposals to pregnancy scares and staged episodes of supposed infidelity, Jesse and Jeana appeared to have no regard for the trust and boundaries governing most healthy, long-term relationships. As the pranks that incited the strongest emotional reactions racked up the most views—averaging between thirty-five to fifty-one million as opposed to the usual seven to twenty—Jesse and Jeana were encouraged to pull more and more pranks of that nature. In accordance with the theory of performative authenticity, videos of this sort are best received as

the emotional vulnerability displayed within reaffirms the perceived authenticity of the onscreen personalities.

As vloggers who filmed and uploaded new videos daily, this initially exclusive onscreen performance quickly infiltrated their offscreen relationship. Whether they were having a good day or a bad day, Jesse and Jeana felt pressured to pick up the camera and assume their online identities. In their own words, “[vlogging] ruined our relationship, knowing we had an audience to appeal to [meant that] we always tried to keep things positive. Behind the camera, we would fight about making videos cause it got very stressful” (The Truth Is...). Evidentially, the act of daily vlogging was extremely damaging as the couple was forced to set their feelings aside and suppress their issues so that they could continue to pump out content. Over time, this resulted in a toxic buildup of resentment as Jesse and Jeana felt unable to resolve their personal conflicts on their own terms. As they lived and worked together, they could never really get the time or space they needed to truly process their emotions and reconcile their differences. Rather, they were constantly rushing through the process of conflict resolution and diminishing their own feelings as well as the feelings of one another.

Without an in-depth analysis of the *YouTube* compensation model, it is difficult to understand why Jesse and Jeana sacrificed their romantic relationship for onscreen success. While the algorithmic model of compensation on *YouTube* undergoes constant change, Shelby Church does an excellent job of breaking down the model through a series of informative videos on her own channel. It is worth noting, however, that the majority of those videos were uploaded in 2019—3 years after the release of Jesse and Jeana’s breakup video and 10 years after the release of their debut video. Although the current compensation model is undoubtedly different than the one that existed ten years ago, the view count remains to be the sole marker of success.

In order to understand how the numbers of views translate into financial compensation, Church identifies advertisement revenue as the main source of income for most content producers. As anyone can make an account and upload videos, it is not in *YouTube*'s best interest to compensate the majority of its users. Like all other commercial businesses, running the video-sharing platform requires a great deal of financial resources. In addition to generating enough income to maintain fixed expenses and overhead, *YouTube* must also generate enough income to compensate their top content creators and keep them active on the platform. This way, they are able to maintain and grow their user base as individuals are more likely to visit the platform if there is a personality with whom they have an ongoing relationship. As previously discussed, this relationship is almost always parasocial in nature but—in the context of *YouTube*—that is more than enough to establish a loyal fanbase.

Since *YouTube* does not charge its users for their viewing services, advertisement revenue is essential to the maintenance of their platform. Just like television networks, *YouTube* charges companies a fee to broadcast commercials before or in between a video. A portion of this income is then shared with the content creator via AdSense—a Google program through which websites are able to serve individualized advertisements to its users. The amount that they are paid, however, is dependent on the number of views their video receives. As the view count directly corresponds with the level of exposure for the advertising company, creators are compensated in accordance with the view count on individual videos: the higher the number of views, the greater the compensation. Like most other digital advertisement platforms, this amount is calculated in increments of one thousand via the CPM (cost per mille). In her videos, Church explains that there is no fixed CPM and the amount can fluctuate largely depending on a number of factors such as user age and location. The CPM is ultimately determined by the

advertising company and typically ranges from one to five dollars. In actuality, only half of that amount goes to the content creator as *YouTube* takes the other half for facilitating the transaction. For most content creators, this is the easiest way of making money on *YouTube* as all it requires is a literal click of the button: “you pretty much check a box and [AdSense] is turned on” (How Much YouTube Paid Me For My 1,000,000 View Video). Due to the way this compensation model operates, both *YouTube* and its content creators place great significance on the view count. Within this context, views are the only form of currency.

It only makes sense then, that as Jesse and Jeana’s view count rose, so too did the pressure to appease their viewers and maintain their success—the greater their success online, the worse-off they became offline. While they may have initially been reluctant to broadcast certain aspects of their private lives, they quickly recognized that regular self-disclosure and performative authenticity were critical to the maintenance of their digital success and subsequently, their livelihoods. In reference to the negative effects of this pressure, Jesse says “I almost feel like we sold our relationship to the internet, it’s fucked up and sad” (Why We Broke Up). Evidentially, Jesse and Jeana sacrificed their romantic relationship to foster and strengthen the parasocial relationships they had with their viewers. While their first videos on *YouTube* may have been a genuine representation of their fun-loving dynamic, their later productions are undoubtedly influenced by the aforementioned shift in priority. What initially began as a series of harmless pranks quickly transformed into a toxic obligation to the internet.

Over time, this insatiable demand for performative authenticity and identity work proved too much, and nine years after the release of their debut video, Jesse and Jeana released their break-up video titled, “A New Chapter”. In this video Jesse and Jeana directly addressed their audience and identified daily vlogging as the stressor that ultimately led to the failure of their

romantic relationship. As Jesse and Jeana had been vlogging daily on-and-off for the seven years leading up to their breakup, they realized that their onscreen relationship was no longer a genuine representation of their real-life partnership. Jesse claimed that, like every other *YouTube* couple he knew, daily vlogging burdened their relationship: “you got to be careful with this tool of people commenting on your life and you making a video every day [because when] you’re big on *YouTube* and you want to continue to do well, you do [what your viewers say you should be doing] in your vlogs” (Why We Broke Up). Evidently, the extreme scrutiny placed upon their relationship as well as the need to always be ‘on’ shifted their public relationship from a genuine interaction to a performative one.

The fact that Jesse and Jeana felt they had to release a video addressing their breakup demonstrates an awareness of the obligation to address their viewers and maintain their appeal of being authentic. This awareness that it was their status as a real-life couple pranking each other (rather than consisting of two people who merely had a professional relationship) that constituted a major appeal for viewers is further verified by the numerous apologies issued by Jeana on multiple different occasions. Interestingly, the way Jeana continued to approach the topic with her viewers largely resembled that of a parent explaining to their child why a divorce was necessary. Despite she and Jesse being the ones directly impacted by the separation, Jeana said “I’m sorry for all of you who feel so sad by us not being together. I know it was a huge part of your lives too” (The Truth Is...). Jeana then reveals that Jesse and she had actually broken up sometime before recording their breakup video, but held off on announcing the news because their new *YouTube* series “Prank Academy” was being released. While *YouTube* did not force them to keep the news of their split under wraps, they recognized that the change in their relationship would affect their viewers’ perception of the production and subsequently, its

performance on *YouTube*. This demonstrates that, at that point, their behaviours both on and offline were largely influenced by their viewership and the greater *YouTube* community; as a result of their voyeuristic viewership, their initially genuine relationship transformed into a calculated performance.

To quote Jesse: “you guys even said it, we changed. When you make videos [and do things, just because] people say to do them, [you really start to question if] I love this person or if I’m just doing it for the video” (A New Chapter). However, although both Jesse and Jeana attribute their breakup to the pressures associated with *YouTube*’s demand for constant and consistent identity work, the two continued to perform their online identities—both as individuals and as a couple—well beyond their breakup. While Jesse and Jeana were accepting of the fact that their romantic relationship had run its course, they knew that their viewers would not be as accepting. As the couple had been vlogging daily in the years leading up to their breakup, their consistent identity work and regular episodes of self-disclosure led viewers to believe that they knew the ‘real’ Jesse and Jeana. This could not be further from the truth, however, as what viewers were witnessing onscreen was more of a performance than a genuine expression of the self. In reference to this, Jeana says, “knowing that we had an audience to appeal to...we always try to keep things pretty positive, for the most part. Behind the camera, it wasn’t always [so]” (The Truth Is...). Despite the strong parasocial relationship they had with their viewers, the couple knew that the sustenance of that relationship was contingent upon their ability to perform the online identities that their viewers have come to recognize as ‘authentic’. As much of their online success was founded on their identity as a happy, good-humoured and fun-loving couple, Jesse and Jeana knew that the complete dissolution of that image would significantly affect their following and income. As such, the couple continued to uphold that

image by sporadically releasing a series of post-breakup videos designed to incite feelings of nostalgia and appease disgruntled viewers.

One particular video, titled “WHY’D WE DO THIS! JEANA & JESSE”, depicted the couple sitting down together to watch several fan-made video compilations of their most romantic moments onscreen. While this type of video may appear relatively commonplace for the couple as they have a history of commodifying and capitalizing on their relationship, it is undeniably performative and subsequently, inauthentic. This is not to say, however, that the emotions displayed onscreen were entirely disingenuous. Rather, it is merely alluding to the fact that the act of watching these videos together was most likely motivated by the knowledge that they would be playing and appealing to an audience. Given that Jesse had moved out of their shared apartment (in New Jersey) and across the country (to Los Angeles) two years before the release of this video, it is evident that its production required a great deal of coordination and scheduling. In addition to Jesse booking a ticket and flying across the country, the couple also had to carve out time in their respective schedules to sit down and film the undoubtedly emotionally taxing video. In that video, a high-spirited Jeana joking teases Jesse as he breaks down in tears watching the various compilation videos. Amongst questioning why they decided to sit down and watch these videos, Jesse and Jeana narrate the experience by regularly alluding to old memories and love lost. In keeping with the ‘reaction video’ genre—where YouTubers often ‘react’ to another video in an exaggerated manner—much of this video’s appeal was derived from its presentation of a seemingly raw and authentic reaction in real time. As Jesse and Jeana were reacting to fan-curated videos of themselves, however, they were viewing themselves through the lens of their audience and inadvertently romanticizing an onscreen relationship that never truly existed offscreen. Evidentially, while the emotions displayed onscreen may be a

genuine representation of the former couple's innermost thoughts, it is undeniable that they played up these emotions to increase dramatic effect. In a sentiment echoing much of what this paper has sought to investigate, Jesse questions "what are we doing to each other for you guys?" (WHY'D WE DO THIS! JEANA & JESSE).

While there is much more work that could be done in terms of analyzing the former couple's post-breakup videos, the aforementioned video perfectly demonstrates the complexities of navigating both a relationship and a breakup in the limelight. Just as Jesse and Jeana had to actively and consistently conduct performative acts of authenticity and identity work as a couple, this same demand extends well beyond their romantic partnership and into their individual lives post-separation. Although their romantic relationship had run its course, their earlier commodification of said relationship made it difficult to heal and move forward in a way that truly served the couple. As Jesse and Jeana were equal parts business and romantic partners, they knew that the dissolution of their romantic relationship did not necessarily signal the dissolution of their business partnership. Since the entirety of their business was founded on their status as a fun-loving couple shooting prank videos on *YouTube*, they had to preserve the integrity of that brand by maintaining a similarly good-natured approach to their separation and continued post-breakup relationship. This meant that, at times, the couple felt compelled to film post-breakup videos (like the aforementioned one) to appease their viewers and maintain the illusion that, while they are no longer together, they are and always have been the same individuals that they represented onscreen. Ironically, even after the demand for performativity ruined their romantic relationship, Jesse and Jeana continued to perform their online identities both as individuals and as two halves of a severed whole.

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