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## **‘Navigating the Travel Blogger Dispositif:’ The importance of aesthetic labour within the digital work of British travel bloggers.**

### **Abstract:**

Drawing on empirical research conducted with nineteen British travel bloggers, the paper reveals how aesthetic labour is a crucial practice in travel bloggers’ digital work, helping them in navigating platform capitalism, audience expectations, and digital visibility.

The paper explores how through a range of aesthetic labour practices, travel bloggers ultimately seek to embody or resist a distinctive travel blogger ‘dispositif’ (or identity). It is through the lens of the ‘travel blogger dispositif’, that the paper highlights how the aesthetic logics and algorithmic biases of platforms perpetuate an idealised version of the travel blogger ‘dispositif’, with participants challenging these digital biases through their aesthetic labour practices. This research contributes to the literature on digital labour by illustrating the intersectional, resistant, and strategic nature of aesthetic work in platformed spaces, offering insights into how travel bloggers perform, negotiate, and reshape their ‘dispositif’ identities within algorithmically-driven digital environments.

**Keywords:** digital labour, travel, bloggers, aesthetic labour, dispositive

### **Introduction:**

In February 2023, the *i* newspaper featured the careers of two travel bloggers in their ‘How We Manage Our Money’ column (Denton, 2023), marking the first of many media articles highlighting the career paths, labour activities, and financial opportunities tied to travel blogging (Lansom, 2023). These pieces reflect a growing public recognition of travel blogging as a legitimate form of digital labour. Within academic scholarship, there has also been increasing interest in the labour practices and performances of individuals whose identities and spaces of work remain inextricably linked to the digital, including critical commentary on platform labour (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014; Brygdes and Sjöholm 2018). Scholars are also examining the political economy of digital labour, focusing on influencers and bloggers as digital creators (Zhao and Abidin, 2023; Cotter, 2019; Duffy and Hund, 2015).

However, research specifically on travel bloggers remains scarce. Travel bloggers offer a unique example of workers for whom the digital is changing the (aesthetic) work they invest into their presentation of self. The uniqueness of travel bloggers as a focus of inquiry comes, in part, because these workers are having to carve out a living online, as travel blogs and social media become the latest evolution of a longer history of travel writing. This evolutionary trajectory creates specific aesthetic labour practices, influenced by the affordances and architectures of contemporary platform-based labour (Willment, 2020).

The significance of this paper then, is that it provides insights into the varied forms of aesthetic labour which travel bloggers undertake to produce a distinctive presentation of their self as a travel blogger, which this paper conceptualises as the travel blogger 'dispositif'. Roughly translated to the word 'apparatus', Crano (2022) discusses how the term 'dispositif' designates any purposeful arrangement, ordering or plan in a variety of heterogeneous contexts. Perhaps the most well-known application of the word 'dispositif' is in the work of Michel Foucault (1980), who used the concept to refer to various institutional, physical or administrative mechanisms or knowledges, which enhanced or maintained the exercise of power over the body. Applying the term to the creative industries, McRobbie (2016) understands the 'creativity dispositif' as a variety of personal and institutional practices, aspirations, world views and physical dispositions which congeal as a set of norms (in her use case, in the encouragement of young people to join the precarious, creative economy). The paper develops the concept of the travel blogger dispositif to highlight how participants actively embody or resist this distinctive identity of self as a travel blogger, understanding aesthetic labour as the mechanisms through which the embodying or resisting of this identification occurs.

Using the lens of the travel blogger dispositif, allows the paper to highlight two key findings. First, the paper demonstrates how the aesthetic labour of travel bloggers is influenced by the platformed architectures and algorithmic biases of social media, which guide the blogger to undertake aesthetic labour to resist or embody particular elements of the travel blogger dispositif. Second, the paper explores how aesthetic labour becomes a form of resistance against the precarity imposed by both the blogging industry and platform capitalism. The paper begins with a review of literature on the political economy of digital labour, focusing

on platform workers and the socio-technical systems of platform architecture. It also examines how algorithms can reinforce stereotypes or biases. The literature review then introduces the concept of aesthetic labour and its relevance to platform-based work, followed by an overview of scholarship on aesthetic labour in digital contexts. The methodology is then discussed, before the analysis section provides empirical examples of how travel bloggers produce distinctive 'dispositif' presentations of self through aesthetic work. The analytical section also discusses how aesthetic labour becomes mediated by platform workspaces, as travel bloggers attempt to (re)produce or resist the distinctive travel blogger dispositif. The paper concludes by reflecting on the significance of these findings.

### **Literature Review:**

#### *Platform capitalism and digital labour:*

Cultural and creative work is a specific form of digital labour, which includes platform-mediated activities such as crowd work and gig work. Jarrett (2022: 22) defines digital labour as explicitly involving "creative and technical workers in the social media economy—including influencers, cammers, beauty bloggers, and live streamers" involved in platform-mediated digital labour. For these workers, digital labour is premised on the production, and productive consumption, of digital media and its associated contents. Jarrett (2022) applies critical Marxist and feminist frameworks to analyse how digital labour is exploited for profit, showing how the processes of digital work become organised to maximise the extraction of value. Although focusing on user labour which produces data commodities, Fuchs (2010), also applies a Marxist, critical frame, to argue that Internet users become both productive labourers and exploited capital, as their labour generates surplus value. Jarrett (2022: 38) extends this argument, highlighting that this exploitation of digital workers ultimately creates "cruel, coercive, or cynical conditions" of labour, which lead to precarious conditions of instability, unpaid work, and long hours.

The precarious and exploitative nature of digital labour is central to debates on platform capitalism and content creation. For example, Guarriello (2019: 1751) analyses YouTube Gaming and suggests that digital labour has become part of a "stealthy and playful turn of neoliberalism," where individuals leverage their own labour and creativity in the interests of

financial capital. Streamers, she notes, create personalised media economies as intimate spaces, where they use the affordances of the platform to mediate and perform a desired sense of self. These performances of self are constantly mediated by specific algorithmic logics, meaning the streamers' labour remains constrained and embedded by the platform's affordances and algorithms. Similarly, Kim and Yu (2019) use the example of the Webtoon platform to actively understand digital platforms as institutional mediators. They discuss how digital platforms combine socio-technical and capitalist practices in specific and dynamic ways that shape labour. The techno-politics and affordances of each platform overwhelmingly influence the modes of labour undertaken by workers in each of these digital spatialities. Returning to the idea of the *dispositif* in relation to platform capitalism then (Crano, 2022; Foucault, 1980; McRobbie, 2016), the affordances of platforms function as apparatus through which the 'norms' of the content creator *dispositif* become congealed and established. The successful engagement and use of certain platform apparatus allows the successful content creator to align their identity with that of the content creator *dispositif*.

However, social media platforms also reinforce biases and harmful logics through their algorithms and own capitalist modes of production. Social media platforms (such as Instagram) rely on algorithms (a complex set of digital instructions) to curate content in a way which they claim, places content of what users 'care about most at the top of the feed'. However, the opaque nature of these curation practices enacted through platform algorithms and content moderation practices, can lead to the privileging of certain types of content and bodies (Kayser-Bril et al., 2020). Witt et al. (2019: 559) highlight how Instagram's algorithm disproportionately removes images of larger women, while allowing more "thin-ideal" depictions of women to remain. Similarly, Kayser-Bril et al. (2020) argue that Instagram's algorithm appears to prioritise images of women in bikinis or underwear over other female content, reflecting a bias toward sexualised representations. Their study also shows how the processes of training social media algorithms and the training data itself, can lead to further biases. For example, Instagram's content moderation algorithms reinforce racial biases, with the disproportionate "shadow-banning" of posts by Global Majority people as Instagram regularly identifies their posts as containing content which they decree as 'violent' or 'profane'. These issues arise in part because of the opacity of

Instagram's internal workings, making it difficult to fully understand how these biases are created (Kayser-Bril et al., 2020). Here we see how algorithmic biases are mechanisms which maintain power over the content creators' body, with the content creator *dispositif* ultimately being mediated by digital, platform curation mechanisms (Foucault, 1980).

Travel bloggers also undertake their digital labour within these spaces of platform capitalism, where their digital work becomes an extracted value. The value of their digital labour therefore also becomes mediated by the techno-political affordances and aesthetic logics of the platforms upon which they work (i.e. the aestheticised logic of visibility discussed by Kayser-Bril et al., 2020 and Witt et al., 2019). Aesthetic labour (as performed by individual people) therefore becomes the means through which the individual digital labourer, can acknowledge and crucially, either embody (or resist) the dominant aesthetic logics derived through the techno-political affordances of platforms (which this paper discusses in terms of the idealised travel blogger '*dispositif*'). Travel bloggers create and curate their own '*travel blogger dispositif*' through their aesthetic work, as the means through which they can survive within the constraints of platform capitalism, and its overwhelmingly extractive and precarious conditions.

#### *Aesthetic logics and digital work:*

The concept of aesthetic labour has increasingly been used to understand the varied work of online content creators. This is because the aesthetic realm remains fundamentally important to digital labour processes, labour markets, and labouring subjectivities (Brydges and Sjöholm, 2018). Aesthetic[s] as a multivocal term has been applied to many different fields of study, including cultural studies. Since the 1980s, aesthetics has been employed as a mechanism to interrogate the symbols of different cultural forms, from music to TV (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). More recently, scholars of visual, social media cultures have contemplated aesthetics to differentiate between digital platforms, devices and online cultures. In thinking about 'aesthetics' in relation to digital platforms, scholars have interrogated the styles, logistics, labour and cultures indicative of a platform's distinctive genres and tropes of content (Leaver et al., 2020). This research continues the cultural studies focus on the aesthetic, interrogating the digital, platformed workspaces of travel bloggers as cultural forms imbued with symbols. The paper does this by putting the term

'aesthetic' to work, through unpacking the processes (and importance) of *aesthetic labour* undertaken by British travel bloggers within their digital work.

Aesthetic labour is defined as the supply of 'embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers which favourably appeal to consumers, and which are then mobilized, developed and commodified to aid in the worker's performance of a certain workplace persona' (Warhurst et al., 2000: 4). This concept evolved from research on emotional labour, such as Hochschild's (1983) work on flight attendants, which focused on how workers managed their feelings and emotions to create specific customer experiences. Subsequent research has considered how the stylisation of workplace performances produced specific demeanours within workers, and how these demeanours were then utilised by companies to help develop their company brands (Warhurst et al., 2000). Emphasis was placed on the embodied nature of service work, and hence the corporeal labour involved in the production of particular dispositions (Witz et al., 2003). Symbolic values became attached to workers' bodies, which created physical capital through socially constructed systems of bodily and cognitive dispositions. The creation of this physical capital ensured durability and consistency within the labour performance (Bourdieu, 1992). Companies could then further mould the embodied dispositions of the worker, creating manufactured and performative 'styles of flesh'. The production of these distinctive 'styles of flesh' helped to ensure that the worker would produce a particular stylised workplace performance which was of benefit to the employer (Witz et al., 2003: 37).

In the current era of platform capitalism, content creators are increasingly tasked with circulating their own personas as commodities (Gill and Pratt, 2008). This process of aestheticisation is driven by the need to create a marketable identity within a platform-driven economy. This need to aestheticise the individual-as-worker occurs within a digital economy where the need to create a positively received persona informs much of the motivation behind *why* individuals undertake the aesthetic work that they do (Duffy, 2017). Social media platforms act as "games" with specific "rules" that dictate the success or failure of these aesthetic labour performances. For example, Cotter (2019) highlights how performances of the self-undertaken by influencers online, become shaped, enabled, and constrained by the situated affordances of social media platforms. Influencers see their use

of social media occurring within the confines of a 'game', where the algorithmic architecture of the platform forms the 'rules' digital workers must live by. The 'reward' for following the 'rules' is the visibility of the influencer's digital labour, and a platform space through which they can share and commodify their performances of self. Aesthetic labour therefore becomes a practice which helps digitally enabled workers to successfully 'play the game'. Aesthetic labour therefore becomes a means through which content creators are able to reinforce the 'norms' which maintain or enhance the development of the content creator 'dispositif' (Foucault, 1980; McRobbie, 2016).

Carah and Dobson (2016) highlight how influencers use aesthetic labour, to perform a "hot" body that appeals to social media algorithms, which are ultimately designed to recognise and reproduce content that stimulates attention and engagement from viewers. Aesthetic labour occurs through body maintenance practices, from make-up application to exercise regimes. This bodily maintenance becomes digitally mediated and performed using social media, with aesthetic labour also involving decisions about camera angles, editing and what constitutes the 'best' image. Foster (2022) similarly found that online influencers want to mirror a look which has proved successful within Instagram algorithms. This has resulted in the proliferation of white, female influencers who often mirror each other's look and appearance online, in search of success. Intimacy is another important currency within the algorithmic architecture of social media. In her work with lifestyle influencers in Singapore, Abidin (2015) discusses how influencers appropriate and mobilise intimacy as a resource, through which they are able to collapse the distance between themselves and their audiences. Abidin and Thompson (2012: 467) also discuss the rise of 'blogshops' as online forms of commerce which have enjoyed extensive commercial success, and which are built by an 'apparently intimate, close-knit online community of women'. Blogshop models actively use their bodies to create unique personas, and live out their daily lives online, in a bid to develop *persona intimacy*. *Persona intimacy* is an 'emotional attachment between blogshop consumers and blogshop models', with the models using this intimacy between themselves and their audiences as a marketing strategy, to create value and profit for their blogshop (Abidin and Thompson, 2012: 472).

Different platforms further shape the nature of aesthetic labour through their unique affordances, digital cultures of use, and aesthetic norms. Zhao and Abidin (2023) highlight how the aesthetics of TikTok make it uniquely placed to facilitate digital activist practices as shown by the response to the "Fox Eye" makeup trend, which was criticised for its racial insensitivity. They emphasise how TikTok's platform-specific affordances—namely its curated image selections, creative use of sound, and frequent use of visual filters and effects—help users to explain and challenge this problematic "Fox Eye" trend. In contrast, Instagram's algorithm, which prioritises 'likes' and 'follows' has been criticised for promoting inauthentic representations of peoples' lives. Rosa and Soto-Vasquez (2022) argue that Instagram's affordances and aesthetic norms as being a platform for self-representation, self-promotion and algorithmically based commodification, contributed to a commodified "aesthetic of otherness," distorting the realities of migrant groups. This tension between authenticity and self-presentation is also explored by Audrezet et al., (2020). They investigate how social media influencers must engage in personal authenticity strategies during instances influencer marketing, where they must promote branded products on their social media, whilst seemingly maintaining their own authenticity online.

This paper will highlight the importance of aesthetic labour within the digital work of travel bloggers. It will demonstrate how the aesthetic labour of travel bloggers becomes shaped by the structures of social media platforms and their algorithmic biases. It will use the lens of the travel blogger *dispositif* to demonstrate how travel bloggers use aesthetic labour to resist or embody elements of the idealised travel blogger *dispositif* for their own advantage. In doing so, the paper also highlights the importance of aesthetic labour in the digital work of travel bloggers as a means for resisting against the precarity of platform capitalism.

### **Methodology:**

This paper is based on empirical research with nineteen British travel bloggers conducted from July 2018 to June 2019. Three qualitative methods were employed: semi-structured interviews, photo elicitation interviews (using images to prompt discussion), and netnography (a form of online based ethnographic observation). Using qualitative methods

allowed the project to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's creative worlds of work through an understanding of their own images, thoughts and words (Bryman, 2004). Participants were required to self-identify as a travel blogger and as British. This self-identification was recorded via a short form, allowing participants to express any nuances in how they identified with the travel blogger role (e.g., one participant noted they identified more as a professional travel writer than as a blogger). The results of this form were kept with the transcripts from the data collection.

Pederson (2007) discusses how blogging predominantly started in the US, with British bloggers being relatively late-comers to the blogosphere. She highlights that the delayed development of the UK blogging industry will have impacted on the practices of British bloggers, when compared to their American counterparts. The rationale for focusing on British travel bloggers then, is that as British bloggers were relative latecomers to the blogging industry, idealised tropes of the travel blogger *dispositif* were likely to have already begun being shaped. British travel bloggers are therefore an interesting focus of study, as they are *currently* undertaking distinctive digital, aesthetic work to be able to resist or embody this already established travel blogger *dispositif*. This aesthetic work is further creating new knowledges, mechanisms and practices, which congeal to develop a new set of norms of the travel *dispositif* within the industry (Foucault, 1980; McRobbie, 2016). At the time the research was conducted, British travel blogging also represented an interesting field of study as it was just beginning to enter public consciousness as a form of cultural work (Duffy and Kang, 2020; Abidin, 2018). However, it must be acknowledged that focusing only on British travel bloggers could be considered a limitation of the research, as it means the findings cannot account for cultural or linguistic diversity.

Participants were recruited through speculative messages emailed to individuals whose contact details could be found on the first five pages of Google, under the search term 'UK Travel Blogger'. Participants were also recruited through speculative messages posted on travel blogger focused Facebook groups (such as the Top UK Travel Bloggers), and sent to individuals on Twitter (now X). Twitter messages were sent to individuals who included the @UKBloggersRT or @UKBloggers1 accounts in their posts, or who posted their blogs to the #bloggersrequired, #bloggerswanted or #UKTravelBlogger hashtags.

Prior to data collection, the researcher attended three travel blogger related events (one travel writing and blogging course, one travel blogger 'meet up' and the 'World Travel Market' event in London). During these events, the researcher chatted informally with attendees, seeking advice about potential mechanisms for attracting research participants. Twitter and Facebook groups were identified as good platforms to target for recruitment, as they provided reach to different audiences. Instagram was discussed negatively, as the number of unsolicited messages meant many travel bloggers would be unlikely to respond to research requests. The researcher also asked attendees which groups and/or hashtags they frequently used. The most popular Facebook groups and hashtags provided were targeted for participant recruitment. Alternative recruitment methods such as snowball sampling could have been used, but this method may have resulted in participants being recruited from similar geographical areas or from similar travel blogging niches. Snowball sampling is where the initial participant provides details of, and helps to recruit, subsequent participants (Noy, 2008). However, it is important to highlight that sharing the research across these limited hashtags/accounts/groups may have systematically excluded individuals who didn't engage with these accounts from involvement in the research. This could be considered another limitation of the study.

54 self-identified British travel bloggers were approached between July and December 2018 to participate in the research. A total of 21 people who met the study criteria agreed to participate in the study (Appendix 1). The sampling criteria these individuals had to meet was that they had to self-identify as a travel blogger and as British. These 21 people maintained 18 blogs, as HLO and HAH comprised two individuals blogging together on one blog. Participants included 12 female, 9 male and 0 non-binary participants, who were aged between 21 and 50+, and were located across the UK (n16), Australia (n2), and Portugal (n1). Each participant was asked to self-identified as a hobbyist, transitioning, or professional blogger. Prior to becoming involved in the research, each participant was provided with an information sheet which outlined the research in more detail. After reading this, participants were given the opportunity to seek any further clarification. If they were still happy to be involved in the project, participants were then asked to complete and sign a consent form. All participants in the research were subsequently assigned a 2 to 5 letter pseudonym alias to help protect their identity. The research was subjected to, and passed, full ethical review by the research ethics committee at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Two interviews were then conducted with each participant: one semi-structured and one photo elicitation interview. Due to the often-nomadic nature of travel bloggers, 10 semi-structured interviews and 9 photo elicitation interviews were conducted via Skype (Sedgwick and Spiers, 2009). All semi-structured interviews were conducted between July 2018 and June 2019, and each lasted 60-75 minutes. The aim of this initial interview was to provide a structured yet fluid context through which participants could discuss their career in the travel blogging industry, their work and their future plans.

Following this initial interview, a photo elicitation interview was conducted with each interviewee. Within photo elicitation interviews, visual images act as a stimulus for interview discussion. Harper (2002: 22) notes that, when used during interviews, visual images help to mine 'deeper shafts of different parts of the human consciousness than words alone interviews'. Turning to examinations of working practices, Smith (2015) therefore argues that photo elicitation interviews provide the methodological opportunity to explore multi-faceted elements of individuals' working lives. Photo elicitation interviews therefore provided a useful method for more deeply understanding travel bloggers working lives. In advance of the photo elicitation interview, participants were invited to capture images which they felt embodied the different elements of their working lives and/or workspaces as a travel blogger. These images were then used to stimulate further discussion. The researcher also provided images of the participants' blog and social media from the online observations, with the aim of using these images to elicit further discussion or clarification about the image context. The photo elicitation interviews were also 60 to 75 minutes in length and were conducted from July 2018 to June 2019.

To complement the interviews, online observations were conducted via netnography. Netnography can be defined as a form of qualitative research which draws upon online observation, interviews, and photographic methods to understand the communities and cultures which exist because of the computer-mediated contingencies of the online world (Kozinets, 2019). Netnographic based observation allowed the researcher to observe cross platform inter-relationships and online communities, enabling the researcher to understand the importance of digital practices in the working lives of travel bloggers (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2015). Publicly available content from blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram accounts were captured through screenshots and fieldnotes, from six participants selected at random from the 19 interview participants. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo. A combination of inductive and deductive coding was applied: initial codes were generated from participant responses, followed by axial coding

used to identify key themes based on the literature and research question (Graebner et al, 2012)

### **‘The Identification’ of the Travel Blogger Dispositif**

In the case of professional blogger BTT, a lack of awareness and an associated stigma around travel blogging labour stem from a misunderstanding and undervaluation of travel blogging work by others. This misunderstanding positions travel blogging as a lesser form of work or career, forcing BTT to perform aesthetic labour to resist embodying the travel dispositif, that is to resist against the purposeful arrangement of the presentation of the self as a travel blogger (Crano, 2022). For BTT, aesthetic labour involves carefully managing how she presents her profession to others.

‘I’m in like a WhatsApp group for hikers and I’ll meet new people and they’ll say ‘What do you do?’ and depending on who it is or what mood I’m in, sometimes I’m a travel writer and photographer... As soon as you say blogger you get about a gazillion questions’ (BTT)

Travel blogging, as the latest iteration of travel writing, occurs within the context of a long-established travel writing tradition. Bloggers like BTT often attempt to connect their digital work to this travel writing history to legitimise it. In this context, aesthetic labour serves as a tool for BTT to present herself within a more traditional and respected career narrative, travel writing rather than blogging, which is viewed as more acceptable within the minds of her peers. Focusing aesthetic labour on emphasising aspects beyond travel blogging work (e.g. travel writing or photography) allows BTT to construct a professional identity that exists beyond the stereotypical “travel blogger” dispositif. This suggests that aesthetic labour for travel bloggers extends beyond maintaining a polished digital and physical image as Carah and Dobson (2016) note. Aesthetic labour for travel bloggers therefore includes the way bloggers describe their professional identities (or ‘dispositifs’), actively shaping how they are perceived within *and outside* the platformed architecture and affordances of blogs and social media.

The stigma surrounding travel blogging as “non-serious” work further shapes the aesthetic labour practices of bloggers. In the case of TWR, aesthetic labour involves obscuring any financial motivations linked to travel blogging, aspirations she feels are at odds with the ‘norms’ of the travel blogger *dispositif* (McRobbie, 2016).

‘I don't like going around saying I want to make money because it sounds like I'm doing it for the sake of the money, which isn't true. I do love travelling...but it would just be nice to get that little extra for something that I've worked hard on...I think people just think it sounds like you're being fake or something. You're just doing it for the sake of money, and I think it's also a society thing isn't it? People don't like saying I want to do this [travel blogging] to make money’ (TWR)

Travel bloggers’ discursive narratives around their motivations for blogging work become influenced by a need to undertake aesthetic labour to obscure characteristics (such as financial motivations for working), which are not seen as appealing to others and therefore not beneficial to promotion of the travel blogger *dispositif* (Foucault, 1980). The same fear of social media platform algorithms being premised on the ‘like and follow’ mechanisms which Rosa and Soto-Vasquez (2022) describe, mean that the travel blogger *dispositif* therefore becomes associated with an ‘aesthetic of otherness’, as it cannot show the full, lived realities of travel blogging as a form of work. Aesthetic labour is invested into performing a sanitised version of the travel blogger *dispositif*, where bloggers can only be seen to be blogging as a passion project, and not for making money. This example of aesthetic work demonstrates how travel bloggers must also ‘play by the rules’ of the digital platforms within which they work (Cotter, 2019). The fear of posting content which may not appeal to audiences limits which aspects of travel blogging labour they can share, compelled to perform an image of “authenticity” that aligns with audience and platform expectations of the travel blogger *dispositif* (Guarriello, 2019; Foucault, 1980). In this way, aesthetic labour can be considered a strategy of authenticity management, helping the blogger to demonstrate to their audience they are driven by inner desires for travel and not commercial goals of blogging (Audrezet et al., 2020)

In direct response to these limiting architectures of platform capitalism, resistance to embodying the travel blogger ‘*dispositif*’ has helped some bloggers reduce the demands of aesthetic labour. By distancing themselves from the stereotypical ‘travel blogger’ *dispositif*,

participants were instead able to align their professional identity with their alternative sense of self, minimising the labour involved in maintaining a digital presence that feels inauthentic or dissonant with their own values.

I just don't care enough.  
I just want to be me.  
I don't care about having an Instagram theme or taking outfit pictures outside houses I don't live in to appease to this 'image'.  
I'm not saying it's all bloggers' but it seems to be the majority.



Sourced from Giphy.

Am I a blogger? Am I just a person with a website?  
I even wonder if I consider myself a blogger.  
Google says:  
blogger  
'blɒgə/  
noun  
a person who regularly writes material for a blog."food bloggers post a recipe on a particular theme"

Figure 1. Screenshot of MAM's 'I don't care' blog post [content originally shared May 2017 - reshared in 2019] © MAM

As evidenced in her choice of language and discourse in Figure 1, blogger MAM resists embodying the idealised travel blogger dispositif, which she associates with sycophantic behaviours that clash with her own 'dispositif' identity. Through aesthetic labour, she actively rejects the conventions of the digital labour intrinsic to the successful presentation and embodiment of the travel blogger dispositif. For instance, she avoids "taking pictures outside of houses I don't live in to appease this image." This choice highlights how aesthetic labour serves as a tool for MAM to push back against the stereotypical 'dispositif' of a travel blogger. While Foster (2022) emphasises, aesthetic labour focused on conformity, MAM uses aesthetic choices—such as prioritising long-form narratives and un-curated images—to

move past the similar appearance ideals embodied by many travel bloggers, therefore resisting the commodification of travel blogging, and the monotonous aesthetics associated with an idealised travel blogger dispositif. This resistance can be seen as a form of digital activism, similar to the movements discussed by Zhao and Abidin (2023) on platforms like TikTok. Although, this resistance is focused on pushing back against the affordances and limitations of platform capitalism, rather than against particular online movements.

However, when direct resistance risks content removal or "shadow banning" (Witt et al., 2019), some bloggers, like DG, use parody to critique the travel blogger dispositif.



Figure 2. Screenshot of DG's 'Watch Advert' Instagram post [content originally shared September 2018] © DG

DG, who is transitioning to professional blogging, creates his own aesthetic landscape of self-fashioning, which resists the link between travel blogging and brand sponsorship, by performing aesthetic labour that mocks these conventions. The practices and performances of branded sponsorship on social media platforms are one mechanism through which power continues to be exercised over the body of the travel blogger, with the development of branded content being understood as a central and normalised practice in the development and maintenance of the travel blogger dispositif (Foucault, 1980; McRobbie, 2016). The development of branded content by travel bloggers also represents another example of how digital platforms act as institutional mediators, which Kim and Yu (2019) discuss. The socio-technical politics of branded sponsorship opportunities play out through the

affordances of platformed spaces such as Instagram, ultimately influencing the aesthetic labour of travel bloggers. With bloggers often encouraged to use platform spaces to share images of brand sponsorship and undertake practices such as hashtagging and tagging the brands who sponsor them. However, DG's aesthetic labour involves resisting against the conventions of platform-based branded sponsorship endemic to the idealised travel blogger dispositif. Through his aesthetic labour, DG commodifies humorous characteristics associated with the travel blogger dispositif, in the hope that this parody performance favourably appeals to his audience. This performance is demonstrated in Figure 2. Here, DG parodies typical sponsored content by positioning his body as if mimicking a brand deal. In the caption, he humorously comments that his pose is not for sponsorship but because he's "trying to hold in that fart." DG also critiques the competitive nature of securing sponsorships by joking, "Sponsor me please, I like money and telling the time." Travel bloggers therefore use parody of the idealised travel blogger dispositif to humorously acknowledge the lived realities of the precarious nature of platform-based blogging work, using this as a mechanism to rebuff its normalised but disillusioning realities (Jarrett, 2022; Fuchs, 2010).

### **'The Look' of the Travel Blogger Dispositif**

The 'look' of the travel blogger dispositif is curated by platform logics which, in turn, mediate audience engagement and content consumption (Zhao and Abidin, 2019; Kayser-Bril et al., 2020). Aesthetic labour plays a key role in constructing this look, which is no longer limited to physical appearance or clothing. Instead, travel bloggers engage in deeper aesthetic labour to present a carefully curated persona that resonates with their audience, and which correlates to the 'norms' associated with the mobilisation of the travel blogger dispositif online (McRobbie, 2016). A range of aesthetic labour practices therefore shape and modify the 'look' of the travel blogger dispositif as it moves through these networks of digital relations.

For example, HAH's choice of tropical prints and the intimate staging of their bodies in Figure 3 reflects this deeper aesthetic labour.



Figure 3. Screenshot of HAH's 'Ubud, Bali' Instagram post [content originally shared April 2019] © HAH

The combination of aesthetic decisions (clothing, filters, and captions) allows HAH to construct and share their own travel blogger *dispositif*, which aligns with the idealised and normalised image of a travel blogger. This type of aesthetic labour serves as a mechanism to maintain the co-presence of personal connection with the online audience and to fulfil the professional blogging expectations of the audience community. The performance of intimacy, seen in HAH's posed moments and reflective captions, collapses the distance between blogger and follower, fostering greater engagement between blogger and audience. This performance of *persona intimacy* by travel bloggers, that is intimacy utilised to create valuable relationships between the blogger and their audience, provides another example of the personal and institutional practices which contribute to the established and recognisable norms of the travel blogger *dispositif* (Crano, 2022; Abidin and Thompson, 2022). For the travel blogger, aesthetic labour is therefore focused on creating and curating the embodiment of an idealised, well-travelled *dispositif* which commands intrigue, respect, and intimacy from their audience. Through digital platforms, bloggers curate this look, shaping both the visual and material aspects of their identity. This demonstrates the importance of aesthetic labour as it flows between the online sharing of images, and the

physical actions bloggers must undertake in person, to create and embody a relatable, intimate and recognisable travel blogger dispositif for their audience (Abidin, 2015).

It is also through their aesthetic work that travel bloggers can leverage the unique affordances of each platform to maintain consistency in the performance of their travel blogger dispositif across different online spaces.

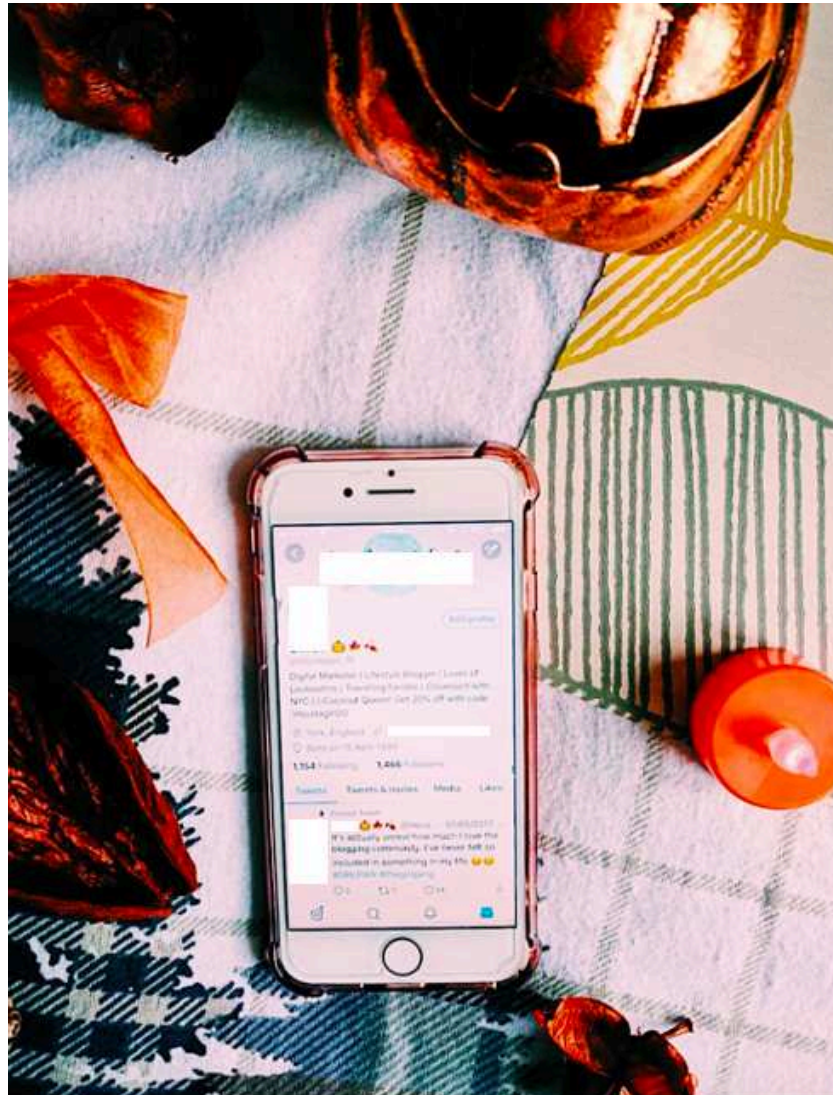


Figure 4. 'Phone' (Image 20/20 of CD photo elicitation interview) © CD

Figure 4 shows how CD invests aesthetic labour into creating a cohesive visual aesthetic that spans her blog and Instagram, using complementary colour schemes and autumnal themes. She meticulously arranges personal items to enhance their visual appeal, as seen in her scarf

and hair ribbon, which match the emojis used on her Twitter. Particular tropes and templates have developed into normalised and expected aesthetics on different platforms (Leaver et al., 2019), demonstrating how utilisation of the affordances of different platforms for aesthetic purposes becomes adopted into the 'norms' associated with the development of the travel blogger *dispositif* (McRobbie, 2016). For example, Leaver et al., (2019) discuss the Instagram trope of personal items painstakingly arranged for the best visual appeal. This trope is replicated by CD, with CD investing aesthetic labour to cultivate this perfect visual aesthetic. This cross-platform coherence is key to creating a recognisable and uniform travel blogger *dispositif*, amplifying her recognisable visibility across multiple platforms (Leaver et al., 2019; McRobbie, 2016). In building on the work of Zhao and Abidin (2023), aesthetic labour for travel bloggers therefore involves putting social media platforms *to work*; utilising the affordances and aesthetics of different platforms to ensure the materialisation of a distinctive look of the travel blogger *dispositif* online, which is instantly recognisable by audiences and uniform across different social media. This consistency also aligns with social media algorithms, which favour content that adheres to certain aesthetic norms. By adhering to these visual tropes, CD maximises the chances of her content being amplified by algorithms, which rewards bloggers for performing a recognisable and polished travel blogger *dispositif* (Carah and Dobson, 2016; Foster, 2022).

The embodiment of an idealised travel blogger *dispositif* however, remains intertwined with platform capitalism and algorithmic logics that reinforce racial and gender biases.

'I think it's like a white female on a trip in a red swimsuit. That's kind of how I see travel blogging, that kind of image, but you have to question why this is popular and just kind of look at society... Go outside and go into a shop and look at all the magazines... That's a proven fact that people have an unconscious bias or their bias towards a certain type of person and so [Global Majority<sup>1</sup> bloggers] definitely have to work harder, definitely, it's a given.' (MAM)

MAM discusses how she feels the stereotypical and idealised British travel blogger *dispositif* is a 'white female in a red swimsuit'. This perceived racialised and gendered 'look' associated

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Global Majority' is a shortened version of the term 'people of the global majority' and refers to people who are Black, Asian, Indigenous, of mixed heritage or who have been otherwise been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'. The term recognises that these individuals constitute the Global Majority, and that that 'the experience of whiteness is not the norm for the majority of people on this planet' (Campbell-Stephen, 2021: 57).

with the travel blogger *dispositif* is likely to be informed by the racialised and gender biases of the algorithms of social media platforms which favour white, female content creators (Kayser-Bril et al., 2020, Witt et al., 2019). MAM's observations point to these continued racial and gendered biases in platform algorithms, which continue to privilege a narrow set of identities. Platform algorithms therefore function as mechanisms of power and control over the travel blogger body, setting and constraining the gendered and racialised 'norms' of what the travel blogger *dispositif* should look like (Foucault, 1980; McRobbie, 2016). This algorithmic bias impacts bloggers from the Global Majority, who often have to work harder to gain visibility and sponsorship opportunities as they feel they exist outside of the idealised travel blogger *dispositif*. MAM's own experience highlights the challenges faced by bloggers who do not fit the hegemonic ideal of the "white, female" travel blogger *dispositif*.

While platforms like TikTok and Instagram pledged to promote more diverse voices following the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Pappas and Chikumbu, 2020), the racial and gendered biases of algorithms persist. As Witt et al., (2019) discuss, the 'black-box' secrecy of the algorithms of platforms such as Instagram, is allowing social media to continue to amplify the expression of certain users, whilst silencing others. It is important to note that this algorithmic silencing of certain bloggers is not exclusive to particular countries (such as the UK) or genres (such as travel blogging) but is instead something that remains globally entrenched within hegemonic Western culture (Witt et al., 2019). Yet, this algorithmic bias impacts on the aesthetic labour demands placed on those seeking to embody a travel blogger *dispositif* beyond the idealised version promoted by platforms. Building on Wissinger's (2012) discussion of the relationship between race and aesthetic labour, in travel blogging work we see individuals who embody a look which is different to the hegemonic 'norm' of the travel blogger *dispositif* having to adhere to stricter aesthetic standards. This means travel bloggers who are not white females are forced to adhere to stricter aesthetic standards than their white, female counterparts. This may not be in the form of corporeal body work, but relates to the need for black or male bloggers to invest enhanced aesthetic labour into ensure their content remains visible and is noticed by brands, as MAM describes.

## **Conclusion:**

The aesthetic labour of British travel bloggers is therefore multifaceted and deeply embedded in the dynamics of platform capitalism, audience expectations, and digital visibility. As this paper has shown, travel bloggers engage in a range of aesthetic practices, curating their bodies, narratives, and online personas, to align with or resist the dominant travel blogger *dispositif*. Aesthetic labour therefore also serves as a form of resistance, pushing back against the commodification of travel blogging and the stereotypical *dispositif* of the 'ideal' blogger. By rejecting the typical markers or 'norms' (McRobbie, 2016) of the travel blogger *dispositif*, travel bloggers create a space for more authentic and less commercialised content, demonstrating how aesthetic labour can become a tool for resisting against the precarious and exploitative realities of platform capitalism present within travel blogging work. Yet, the paper has also shown how the aesthetic labour of travel bloggers *remains* shaped by broader socio-technical forces and aesthetic logics of the platform workspaces they inhabit, demonstrating one way in which the idealised travel blogger *dispositif* maintains power over the travel blogger body (Foucault, 1980). For example, platforms continue to reinforce the racial and gendered logic of the dominant travel blogger *dispositif* as a white female, with Global Majority travel bloggers undertaking aesthetic work to attempt to resist this racial and gender bias.

The findings of the paper therefore highlight the intersectional nature and overwhelming importance of aesthetic labour within the digital work of travel bloggers, where individuals must not only contend with aesthetic standards, but also with the structural inequalities that govern digital spaces. Moreover, the tension between aesthetic labour and platform capitalism revealed by the paper, highlights how travel bloggers must constantly negotiate their 'travel blogger *dispositif*', in ways that align with platform logics while maintaining a sense of authenticity. The pressures to conform to algorithmic expectations, whether through visual coherence, engagement-driven content, or the performance of intimacy, demonstrate how platform affordances shape the work and idealised '*dispositif*' of travel bloggers.

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#### Appendix 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Location	Type of Blogger
TTW	29	Global Majority	F	UK	Hobbyist
DFS	30-40	Global Minority	M	Portugal	Professional
BTT	40-50	Global Minority	F	UK	Professional
JT	40-50	Global Minority	F	UK	Professional
SD TTC	Did not disclose	Global Minority	F	UK	Attempting to professionalise
HLO*	34, 35	Global Majority, Global Minority	M, M	UK	Professional
AD	22	Did not disclose	M	UK	Hobbyist
TBT	35-44	Global Minority	F	UK	Professional
ICW	25	Did not disclose	M	UK	Hobbyist
TWR	24	Global Majority	F	UK	Hobbyist
HIT	50+	Global Minority	F	UK	Hobbyist
BBF	25-35	Global Majority	F	UK	Hobbyist
MAM	28	Global Majority	F	UK	Hobbyist

LEX	30-40	Did not disclose	M	UK	Attempting to professionalise
STB	50+	Global Minority	F	UK	Attempting to professionalise
DG	23	Global Minority	M	UK	Attempting to professionalise
CD	21	Global Minority	F	Australia	Professional
JTA	22	Global Majority	M	UK	Attempting to professionalise
HAH	24, 25	Global Minority, Global Minority	M, F	Australia	Professional

- HLO and HAH both comprise of two individuals with one blog
- Each participant's location is defined as where they were living when they signed the consent form to be involved in the research