



## YouTubing the Way Up.

### *The Struggle for Economic Independence of Italian YouTubers in the Beauty Industry.*

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#### 1 Introduction

In 2011, *YouTube* organized a roadshow<sup>1</sup> to introduce an emergent partnership program. The show carried the flattering name of *Becoming YouTube Stars* and was hosted in several capitals of Europe. During the stop-over in Rome, Sara Mormino, the then Head of *YouTube* Content and User Operations EMEA<sup>2</sup>, inspired an audience of aspiring youngsters by quoting the stories of ordinary people who, thanks to this platform, became celebrities. “Clio is a girl, who works as a makeup artist. One day, in her room, she sat down in front of a camera and shared with others her passion for makeup. Now, in addition to being a *YouTube* partner, she owns her makeup line, is contacted by sponsors to discuss about her products, wrote two books and has a column in a newspaper.”<sup>3</sup> Clio Zammateo, aka *ClioMakeUp*, is currently among the most successful Italian beauty bloggers and YouTubers having started her *YouTube* channel in 2008 from her apartment in New York. “Who will be the next talent?” asked Sara Mormino to her excited audience. “Our aim is to share with you our commitment to work together, so that everybody can really be successful on *YouTube*, either by becoming a partner or maybe by having someone who gives you the chance to make a movie in Hollywood.”<sup>4</sup>

Since the launch of the *YouTube* partnership program, inspired by countless online articles on how to become a blogging star in few, simple steps, people around the globe have dreamt of earning a living by broadcasting themselves. The image *YouTube* have promoted of

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<sup>1</sup> A roadshow is “a series of shows or events that take place in different places around the country, for entertainment or in order to give the public information about a company, product, etc.” Source: Cambridge Dictionary Online.

<sup>2</sup> EMEA is the abbreviation for Europe, Middle East, and Africa. Source: Collins Dictionary Online  
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/emea>

<sup>3</sup> *LuissGuidoCarli*. “Sara Mormino – Becoming a youtube star!” In *YouTube*. Last accessed December 2017.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NvaZZw6YKc&t=1193s>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

themselves as a free, democratic tool for self expression and realization has proven to be particularly appealing for individuals, who for different reasons may not be economically emancipated or fully integrated in the job market. Hence the question of this research: does *YouTube* really offer unprecedented chances of accessing wealth? More specifically, has it served as a tool to financially enliven those individuals who suffer from economic marginalization?

To answer these questions, I have carried out research focused on female Italian *YouTube* beauty bloggers, aged between 23 and 35 years old. This target group has been chosen specifically to represent a segment of the Italian society made economically vulnerable by the economic recession in Italy over the past two decades, resulting in mass migration, high unemployment rates, and ultimately marginalization in the European and global markets.

As of January 2017, the unemployment rate in Italy is at 11.9%, 37.9% of which represents Italian women aged 15 to 24 and 18% women aged 25 to 34.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Theoretical background and methods

The research rests on academic works aimed at demonstrating the democratic and anti-democratic potentials of the internet, as well as of the blogging activity itself. Among the publications that are relevant for the theoretical formation of this project, the most prominent are the works of Wesch (2009), Wellman (2001), Lange (2007 and 2008), Chang (2014) and Barber (2006). Further inspiration comes from Miller (2016) and Senft (2008).

Wellman (2001), for instance, observed that the internet is the *CyberPlace* where unprecedented relations can be established and aggregation among human beings is often based on shared interests. This has the potential to enhance the overcoming of class and gender divides that traditionally shape the offline society. Chang (2014), in her research, quoted Hong's work "Existentially surplus: Women of Color Feminism and New Crises of Capitalism" in theorizing that blogging is the activity of those surplus subjects who wish to push the boundaries of their subjecthood, redefine their citizenship and access wealth also through new channels. Finally, Barber (2006) highlighted that the internet is neither democratic nor anti-democratic in its nature, rather a tool that can be utilized for both purposes. If on the one hand, the internet carries potentially anti-democratic features (being an instantaneous, unmediated medium the access of which is still limited to some brackets of the population), on the other, it also carries features which on the contrary have a high democratizing potential (being a horizontal, point-

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<sup>5</sup> Istat. "Occupati e disoccupati (dati provvisori Gennaio 2017)." Last accessed December 2017. <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/197394>

to-point communication medium, participatory and pluralistic in nature).

The adopted methodological approach is a combination of participant observation of the beauty bloggers' *YouTube* channels and social media, individual interviews, gathering of historical and statistical data across online sources. The research has been carried out in its entirety online and by means of digital tools<sup>6</sup>.

The project is the result of a three-month research directly involving five participants, each of whom have created a *YouTube* beauty channel and fall under the above mentioned demographics. Four out of five participants manage a channel with less than 5,000 subscribers, while only one participant, *AnnalisaSuperStar*, exceeds 60,000 subscribers. This last participant, that we might consider the most successful in terms of numbers achieved, invests 8 hours a day on the channel and on average produces four videos per week. She is also the only one of the group wishing to abstain from revealing information in regards to her education, relevant work experience and strategies adopted to develop her channel. The perceived feeling during the interviews was that, the more the participants' visibility, the less their willingness to share information regarding their achievements, particularly those of a financial nature. This has brought me to re-evaluate my interviewing techniques and research methods, but has led to no change of approach, for the reason that follows.

This research has primarily relied on content that the participants have willingly and wittingly shared both on *YouTube* and other social media, as well as on information that they have chosen to reveal during interviews I conducted with them. All the data provided has either been pre-emptively put together and adapted to the chosen communication channel (as it is the case of the content shared on social media) or has been filtered according to the self-image the participants wished to broadcast or preserve (as it is the case of the individual interviews). In no case was it possible for me to get validation for the information provided through verbal communication by means of direct observation of the participants' actions and behaviours off camera. Indeed, I had basically no access to information that the participants did not want to disclose, but that would have nonetheless been useful for the aims of the research. This not only poses questions of ethical order, rather also questions about the limitations of carrying out research exclusively online, where individuals, stuck behind a screen, are perceived more as broadcasted (and broadcasting) personas rather than holistic selves.

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<sup>6</sup>The digital tools utilised to carry out this research are online communication tools such as *Skype* and *Whatsapp*, social media and broadcasting platforms such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, research engines like *Google*.

### 3 The ABC of the YouTubing experience

With the research questions in mind, we will retrace and compare the YouTubing experience of the participants, from the beginning of their broadcasting adventure to their channels latest achievements. The reasons why these young women decided to share videos on *YouTube* are varied. If some, like Alessandra Rocuzzo aka *AdrenALINA* (Fig. 1), were suffering from solitude due to their friends' emigration abroad, some others aimed at building a digital dimension for themselves, where they could connect with like-minded individuals and discuss their common interests.

On a general level, *YouTube* is a platform for lonely people. Once I found a person I feel comfortable with – I got engaged three years ago, I could share everything about cinema and I created a cultural club in my city. I haven't gone on stand-by [on *YouTube*], I have only transferred from *YouTube* to my city, to my real life everything I want to share. (*AdrenALINA*)

Only one participant, Giulia Bencich (the youngest of all five, who started creating content when the platform had already matured a lot) opened her channel with the aim of making of this a full-time job.

According to the data collected, the reasons that led the participants to open a *YouTube* channel are more existential and emotional than financial. Over time all of them developed the desire of gaining visibility and utilizing the platform to access wealth, inspired by the success stories of beauty bloggers like the aforementioned Clio Zammatteo and by the rumours circulating online about the staggering annual income of the highest paid *YouTube* partners like *PewDiePie*, whose income in

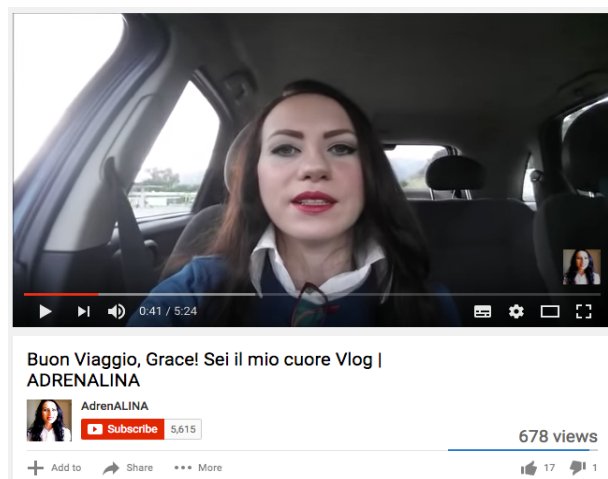


Fig. 1. *AdrenALINA* vlogs on *YouTube*. This video is dedicated to her friend Grace, who is leaving for Munich for work reasons  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgrOGvUZqwo&t=75s>) 2015.

2015 allegedly reached \$12 million<sup>7</sup>. While some scholars have associated the YouTubing activity with excessive levels of narcissism<sup>8</sup>, this research, instead, highlights that *YouTube* is in itself a medium with narcissistic and individualistic connotations. Since its launch, this platform has been a mirror for the trends of consumeristic societies in a digital era, where “self-expression has become the new entertainment,” as Arianna Huffington stated during her speech at the Internet Retailer Conference held in San Diego on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011.<sup>9</sup>

As for the content of their *YouTube* channels, the participants claimed to have chosen beauty because make-up and beauty in general have been a lifetime passion of theirs, which in the case of Giulia Bencich developed by watching *YouTube* make-up tutorials. It may not be coincidental that beauty is among the three most profitable subjects to talk about on *YouTube*, while in 2016 the cosmetic industry has registered a domestic consumption of cosmetics totalling €9,900 million as well as a growth of 0.5%.<sup>10</sup> None of the participants have specified whether they have taken this data into consideration at the time of choosing what content to broadcast.

#### 4 The making of the YouTubing persona

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the marketing strategies *YouTube* employed at the launch of their partnership program propagated the idea that becoming a *YouTube* star is not only possible, but easier than what one might think. This research demonstrates that the road to becoming a *YouTube* celebrity is long, and starts with the investment of a considerable quantity and variety of resources that are not accessible or available to everybody (Lange 2007). The basic assets required to broadcast oneself are not only hardware and software, but also a fair amount of time and knowledge. As Giulia Bencich remarks during her interview, a good internet connection is a must have, and it is even more essential than having professional equipment or video editing skills:

I'd like to constantly upload content, even now, but unluckily I have got bad internet connection. I can't upload as much as I want, this is a huge weakness. They say one needs to have a cool camera and so on, but if one lacks a good internet connection they won't manage to do a thing. [...] It takes me ages to upload a video, since where I live is the only area of Rome where there is no fibre optic, having a faster connection is practically impossible. Therefore, whenever I can I use the internet at my boyfriend's place or at my friends' to upload the

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<sup>7</sup> Madeline Berg. “The World’s Highest-Paid YouTube Stars 2015,” in *Forbes*. Last accessed December 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2015/10/14/the-worlds-highest-paid-youtube-stars-2015>

<sup>8</sup> Valeria Giacomelli (2015) “Spettacolarizzazione del privato su YouTube Italia: il fenomeno dei vlog come diari intimi.” Master's thesis, Università di Bologna.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-media-celebrity-ariana-huffington-self-expression-2011jun15-story.html> (last accessed in January 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Cosmetica Italia. “I numeri della cosmetica. Dati di mercato 2017.” Last accessed March 2017. <http://areastampa.cosmeticaitalia.it/it/market-data/2017/cosmetics-by-numbers/>

videos, otherwise it takes me three days to post a video 2 minutes long. It is unbelievable. (Giulia Bencich)

All the resources needed to get started are quantifiable economically. According to the participants' experience, not only do they add up to the thousands but following this initial investment it can last years before the channel started to receive the attention required to generate financial return.

In addition to acquiring said assets, the YouTuber needs to engage in an intense “face-working”<sup>11</sup> activity, i.e. an activity of self-reflection, inspired by context collapse<sup>12</sup> and aimed at constructing a YouTubing persona, the identity of which is defined by a certain type of morality.



Fig. 2. Michela shares on YouTube her knowledge in matter of special effects makeup, that she learnt at the Delamar Academy of Makeup of London. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYxAr1rw5cY>) 2016.

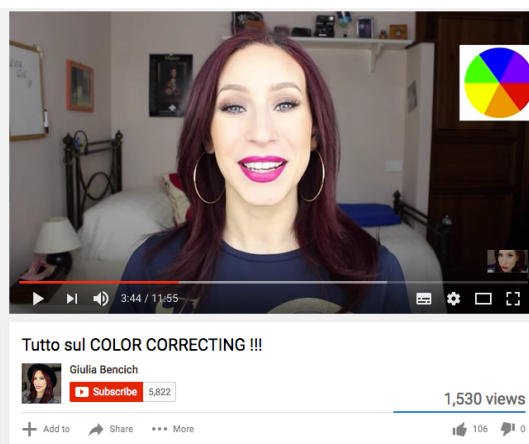


Fig. 3. Giulia Bencich explains the fundamentals of colour correcting (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nu1IJyRUS7o&t=500s>) 2016.

Morality, here, is not only defined by the channel core value and by the interest for beauty, rather also, and especially, by a code of conduct that is composed of several elements, among which:

- Technical quality of the broadcasted videos.
- Accuracy of the broadcasted content, from which derives credibility.

During our interview, *AnnalisaSuperStar* explained:

I have a weekly feature that I called *Healthy Friday*, where 90% of the ideas developed are mine. But to be sure of what I am saying and not deviating the

<sup>11</sup> Michael Wesch (2009) “YouTube and You: Experiences of Self-Awareness in the Context Collapse of the Recording Webcam.” in *Explorations in Media Ecology* 8, no. 2: 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> The term “context collapse” has probably been coined by cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch, and refers to the collapse of contexts that happens online, where individuals can deal with many audiences at the same time, as opposed to face-to-face interactions, where they normally deal with limited groups. Michael Wesch's explanation of what context collapse is can be found at the address <http://mediatedcultures.net/youtube/context-collapse/>

message, I am always assisted by third parties. Meaning that, thank God I have friends who work as professionals, like a gynaecologist, a personal trainer and so on, who I know I can bother, in a way. Those videos I am always cautious with. At times, to make a video it takes two weeks of work during the night, cause I almost always work at nights or early in the morning, I work hard on them. (AnnalisaSuperStar)

-Usefulness of the broadcasted content, in other words 'how educational' it is (Fig. 2, fig. 3).

-Transparency and authenticity, which *AnnalisaSuperStar* deems one of the main characteristics of her YouTubing identity:

I never use artificial lights to make my videos, only natural light because artificial light seems too fake to me, too elaborated. I have used LED lights only once, to make a video for *AnnalisaSuperStar*. I looked like Barbara D'Urso<sup>13</sup>, it annihilated my facial traits. I like freckles and the bags under the eyes, I don't give a damn of these things [...] The difference between *YouTube* and TV is that TV is artificial, while *YouTube* is made by people, by your neighbour. I mean, also TV people can be your neighbours but in the collective imagination they are not. Therefore the 'real woman' – you'll pass the term, it doesn't mean that TV women are not real, but there things are different – the 'real woman' has got bags under her eyes. In the morning, the 'real woman' doesn't put eight layers of makeup before going out. The 'real woman' applies a bit of concealer, a bit of blusher and that's it, this is what I mean. So I don't care to appear perfect because I don't want to give an unrealistic image of myself, because I am not perfect. I am one that at home wears slippers, as many others do (Fig. 4). (*AnnalisaSuperStar*)

-Consideration for the audience's requests and expectations, comments and critics.

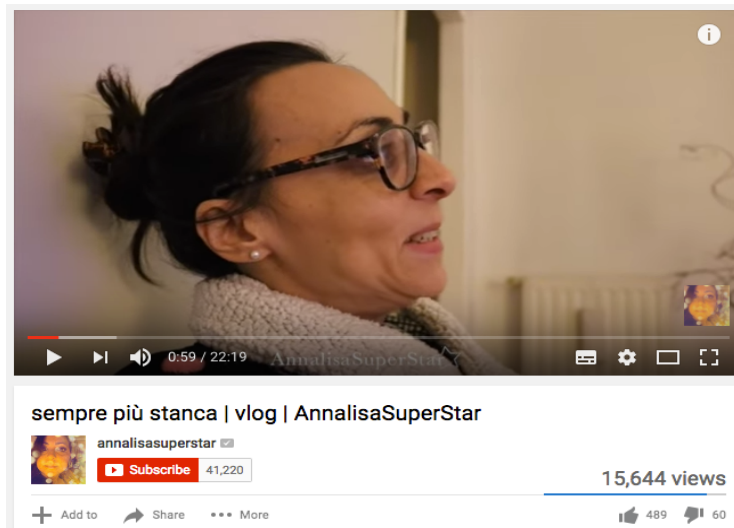


Fig. 4. *AnnalisaSuperStar* vlogs about an ordinary afternoon at home, in her video titled “more and more tired”. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtrTALIFSDo&t=86s>) 2016.

<sup>13</sup>Barbara D'Urso is an Italian TV presenter, who is considered by many to be the queen of trash TV.

-YouTubing not only for financial ends, but also for those human and emotional as well. As *AdrenALINA* recalls during her interview with the author:

It wasn't just about feeling lonely, not having people around me to share interests like books, cinema with. I used to frequent some circles but that was not enough. Indeed, my strong passion for make-up didn't match my friends' taste, and I wanted to make new contacts at all costs. So at first I started writing several YouTubers and bloggers. [...] I remember jumping for joy when I received the first comments, it has been beautiful, strong emotions, meeting new people. I have always maintained human relationships, and kept no screen between myself and the other person, because that was indeed what I wanted: healthy and human company. To date, four out of five big friends of mine are people I met on *YouTube*. [...] When one overcomes the distance, this is when a real relationship is built. People who contacted me told me how I would keep them company through hard times, when they had sick family members or when they were sick themselves, having issues with their health or at university. They would tell me about themselves and this has been a huge human and social enrichment for me. (*AdrenALINA*)

I started YouTubing because I had just lost my job, I am talking about a few years ago, and I was a bit bored as I was used to work, to always do something, to be in touch with people, to study at university. So I started my channel to defeat boredom, then it became a pleasant hobby. [...] *AnnalisaSuperStar* started in 2009 because I had to do something. Then I would also follow a few other channels, they were not particularly famous but I liked them, they talked of frivolous things, but I found them very entertaining. So I decided to give my contribution to the whole world. At first I didn't do much. My channel started doing better in the last two-three years, because I put effort. I was about to shut it down but then I gave myself a second chance. Basically, *AnnalisaSuperStar* was born to share and keeps on running for the same reason, and also because I like the creative side of it. [...] The creative side of *YouTube* is what makes it almost essential to me. I like the creative side of it, I love inventing, I put a lot of passion in it. I am glad people realise that I don't do it for money, if I had to consider the financial side of it I'd say I am crazy, it is not worthwhile if one considers the amount of hours spent on it. But all of it is awesome: creating, filming, editing, posting, reading the comments. (*AnnalisaSuperStar*)

-Continuity and consistency in the broadcasting activity.

-Taking inspiration from legitimate sources, for instance successful American YouTubers that became role models to some of the participants. The so-called "American gurus" are treated by many Italian beauty bloggers as real idols and benchmark setters, who somehow embody the American dream of the old days in a modern and cybernetic way. Not dissimilarly from her fellow participants, Giulia Bencich admits she doesn't follow any Italian beauty bloggers.

I almost follow no Italian beauty bloggers, very few. Here I'm talking about American beauty bloggers, because they're the best, ok? In terms of numbers, in terms of contacts with companies. More generally, there are some foreigners, there's a very famous Dutch, there are some Australians, but let's say that the American ones in general are the best in this sector. If you compare American and Italian videos you'll see there is an abyss between the two. In terms of lighting,



in terms of care, in terms of editing. It seems like many Italians do it like... 'whatever, a video brings me money and contacts with the companies. I'll make it but if it is not 100% accurate it won't change much, people will follow me all the same.' I absolutely dislike this attitude, because I commit 100% when I make a video. I try to make it as better as I can, if it is not good I'll cancel it and I'll redo it. People who do it for the sake of doing it, who don't put effort in the editing, I feel they take the Mick. This is why I follow more foreigners than Italians. They are more prepared, even when they are not professional make-up artists. They try to create something new, in terms of make-up, in terms of colour, in terms of products used. I noticed that many Italians show... well, being a professional make-up artist I notice this thing, maybe someone who's not a professional can't see it. Many famous Italian YouTubers show the same make-up only in different colours. This is everything they do. At a certain point... before I used to follow Italians. When I started understanding more, little by little I started unsubscribing from all the channels, and I found myself following only foreigners. (Giulia Bencich)

-Relationship developed with the cosmetic brands. According to the participants' experience, the audience greatly values the transparency used in reviewing beauty products, as well as the attention to the environmental cause and animal rights, no matter what deal the YouTuber has with the cosmetic company (Fig. 5).

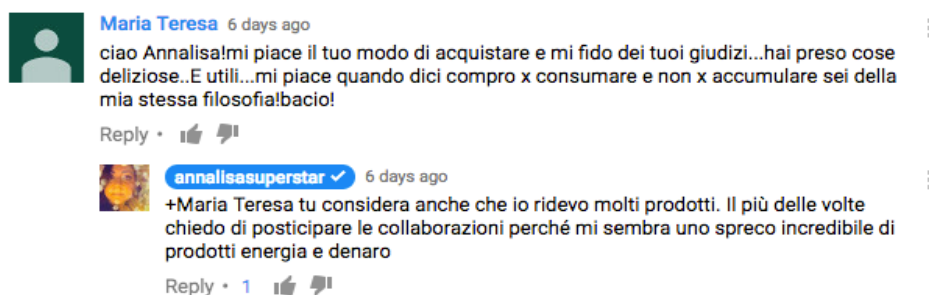


Fig. 5. *AnnalisaSuperStar explains to a subscriber: “Most of the times I ask to postpone the cooperations (with the brands), as it seems to me an incredible waste of products, energy and money”* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9Jr5NXL\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9Jr5NXL_Q)) 2017.

As previously explained, self-reflection aimed at constructing a YouTubing “me” defined by certain moral standards, is the means to define subjecthood and to maintain it. Morality, encompassing all the core values of the YouTubing self, is the coin to navigate the capitalistic cyberspace and attain cyber-citizenship<sup>14</sup>. In their channels, YouTubers become the queens of a personalized network, where the community is shaped on role-to-role dynamics. As theorized by Barry Wellman (2001), the relationships created in this media circuit are deep, as they are based on shared interests and values, but at the same time they are loose, since

<sup>14</sup>Chang (2014: 6) explains that Grace Hong, in her “Existentially Surplus: Women of Color Feminism and the New Crises of Capitalism,” identifies “a change in the determination of surplus subjecthood in the post WWII era, due to a shift within the capitalist system from a focus on production to that of speculation.” This shift has caused “subjectification become more organised as a choice, available to populations that were once categorically excluded from normative subjectivity... [thus] we see subjects with access to capital and citizenship in ways previously unimaginable. Because of these seemingly widening notions of citizenship, the importance of morality, rather than a supposed phenotypic and other such markers of difference, then becomes critical in determining proper subjecthood.”

they do not imply any real responsibility. They are relationships where the holistic self is fragmented and only certain aspects of it are used for the establishment of cyber-relationships. This research shows that the relationships set up in the realm of a *YouTube* channel are highly influenced by the numbers (the number of visits, the number of views, the number of thumbs up or down). The very success of the channel is quantified by the total number of subscribers and views achieved. Based on the channel statistics depends the inclusion in the *YouTube* partnership program, the proposal of business partnerships from cosmetic companies, the invitation to networking and promotional events for YouTubers. Such statistics also are a prerequisite for cooperations and or collaborations with other beauty bloggers, which, according to Michela Merone and Giulia Bencich, are not easy to organize for small channels like theirs:

We are not connected with other beauty bloggers. We have cooperated a few times with girls who contacted us, and we agreed. But what happens frequently, as I said in Italy there's a lot of envy and fear of the other, in the sense that, if you have a thousand subscribers more than me you'll say: 'why shall I cooperate with that one, who has a thousand subscribers less than me? I need someone with more visibility to make myself known.' There's a game of prestige for what cooperations is concerned. If they have to work with you and you have a small channel and not many subscribers, they'll prefer doing it with someone who doesn't have much content but has many more subscribers, to make the channel famous. (Michela Merone)

This is a tricky topic. No, I have no connections with other beauty bloggers, but I tried to write many people to cooperate. I am talking both of people with few subscribers as well as people with many, I wrote to many categories, but I never got a reply. I can tell you that. I did it because if you cooperate to make videos, there's always an exchange of subscribers, who follows me will discover another person to follow and vice versa. I never got a reply, a few days ago I wrote a few guys who have channels with numbers similar to mine, but they haven't got back to me. I can't understand what is the reason, if people only aim at those who have channels with big numbers and snob who has small channels. (Giulia Bencich)

## 5 The achievements

After analysing the reasons why the participants opened a beauty channel on *YouTube*, what resources they had to invest, what is the face-work carried out<sup>15</sup>, and what is the nature of the relationships established through their online activity; I return to the research questions and ask: what did our participants achieve? Has the establishment of a role-to-role dynamic within their *YouTube* community allowed for the setup of relationships that are independent from the social and class divide, as a tool to gain access to further resources? Has the international, borderless, person-to-person features of the internet allowed the participants to overcome the borders of, in this case Italy, and the limitations of its

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<sup>15</sup> The expression "face-work" refers to the aforementioned activity of self-reflection that YouTubers carry out, in order to construct their YouTubing persona.

economic and cultural marginality? Has *YouTube* offered unprecedented chances of accessing wealth to economically marginalized individuals? Although all participants agree with saying that *YouTube* is a great learning experience, most of them shared feelings that *YouTube* has not helped them attain the financial independence they all wished for themselves. The first reason, specifically mentioned by three of the five participants, is the lack of connection to the right people (e.g. *YouTube*ers with more visibility and experience). The importance of having the right connections to launch the channel has been indirectly stressed by *AdrenALINA* during her interview:

Six years ago, on a hot Sunday in August 2012, I started my *YouTube* channel, and my blog one year later, this is how my experience started. I reached my peak two years later thanks to very important cooperations, with another *YouTube*er who remained a friend of mine, I don't know if you know her, she's Donatella, she belongs to my sector and had 30.000 subscribers. Thanks to some cooperation and to a friendship that started between us, we can say she launched me, because she had a longer experience than I had in the *YouTube* world. So I reached my peak. (*AdrenALINA*)

This has also been called lack of meritocracy by a participant in particular, Michela Merone:

What I don't like is seeing a lot of people who in my opinion do not deserve much visibility because they don't produce a thing, they don't produce much interesting content, constructive and informative. I am sorry to see that, to see valuable people who make interesting videos and always post new content, they have small channels because they don't have a famous friend that gives them a push, they are not recommended. It's a world where I think meritocracy is lacking. (Michela Merone)

In this case, it seems that the point-to-point communication has not overcome the traditional class divide and the advantages that come from a more traditional form of networking. The second reason is that success, at least initially, is all about numbers. There appears to be a glass ceiling that participants, lacking the connection with relevant people, struggle to reach and break. This glass ceiling is not only constituted by the eligibility criteria of the *YouTube* partnership program, but also by the thresholds cosmetic corporations set as a minimum requirement before starting a business dialogue with the beauty bloggers. The third reason is the restrictions that brands might apply while negotiating the terms of cooperation with the beauty bloggers. Giulia Bencich tells of having missed the chance of working with companies who offered to send their products for her to review, after she asked for the freedom of also giving negative feedback, and *AdrenALINA* echoes her:

What happened is that a brand contacted me, not a cosmetics brand, and I told them 'look, I won't guarantee a positive review, I mean, I'll try your product but if I don't like it I won't recommend it as positive.' Obviously I got no reply. (Giulia Bencich)

Now that people realized the importance of this platform, especially big brands have profiled us YouTubers and they offer to cooperate based on the number of subscribers. The offers are thought differently depending if they are addressed to a small YouTuber or to a bigger one, they send you products and have a very invasive behaviour. This happened to me as well, but I have always refused, I always kept my channel and all my projects free. Still, there's who sends you products and demands from you a positive review. There is also who demands that you talk positively of a product without even trying it. (AdrenALINA)

A fourth element is the geographical disadvantage. Although the net is a border free place, a lot of events of interest for the *YouTube* community still happen offline, in places of geographical relevance. Participation to said events is most of the times not paid and travel expenses are not covered by the organizers. This marginalises YouTubers with small channels and limited resources, who cannot afford to pay for the participation costs and therefore have to turn down meaningful chances of networking.

It happened that we have been invited [to events] but unluckily they were in Milan. They invited us, who have a small channel, and it was a random thing, so we didn't catch a train to go there. I believe that in order to get this kind of invitations we'll need to grow up a bit more. It sounds absurd but at least another 10.000 subscribers. We noticed that channels with 15.000 subscribers, with these numbers they are already on a good path. (Caterina Merone)

The fifth reason is the marginality of the Italian language. Posting content in English is a great asset for YouTubers who aim at reaching a broad audience. It is not a coincidence that the most successful Italian YouTubers upload videos in English. It is also not coincidental that most of them either live in English speaking counties or, like Michela Merone, have lived in the UK (or any other country where English is the first language) long enough to feel comfortable with posting content in English (Fig. 6). The sixth reason is the generational gap, which makes the *YouTube* phenomenon and the work of thousands of YouTubers still misunderstood or underrated by a considerable population bracket:

I am anyways putting a lot of effort. I try and post two videos a week, it is still not a job but I treat it as such. So I am committing to it as it was a real job. I don't consider it anything less than my job as make-up artist. I find it hard to do it though, because people around me do not consider it a real job. At times my parents, or the older people in my family, when I speak with them about it they tell me 'well, is making videos a job? What does it bring you at the end of the month?' It's hard to do this job when nobody around you considers it as such, at times they ask you to do other things and you tell them 'fair enough, but in this moment I am editing a video, to me this is a job' [and they reply] 'fine, but you can do it later'. (Giulia Bencich)

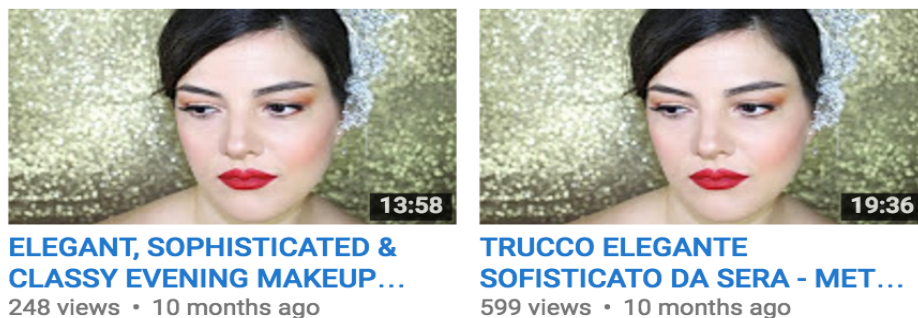


Fig. 6. Michela Merone posts videos both in Italian and English language. (left: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUF7oIkPttA>, right: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D\\_OjBmP8B-c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_OjBmP8B-c)) 2016

## 6 Conclusion

In the digital era, *YouTube*, and more generally the internet, is the place where the “homo techno-logicus” (Yves Gingras, 2005) strives for survival.

He applies those dynamics and methodologies that have already been developed and practiced in the offline social environment to the cyberspace. While the Internet is a digital platform that can potentially offer the chance to overcome some barriers typical of the physical world (geographical, class, gender divide, to mention a few), this potential doesn't really seem to translate into reality in the online environment. Not at least when it comes to *YouTube* and to the experience of those who participated in this research.

The primary reason for this is that internet is a space regulated by private interests, where the very personal freedom of existence and expression is granted and regulated by corporations that preventatively set eligibility criteria, following the old clubbing system logic, where inclusion is determined by the level of usefulness or advantage brought to the members of the club and, ultimately, to the owners of the club itself. In giving partners the right to access to certain privileges only on the base of the generated numbers, *YouTube* follows a logic of preservation of the establishment based on the control of resource distribution that doesn't sound new at all.

The secondary reason is that the participants play on the internet with the resources available to them offline. Although all of them value the amount of knowledge they gathered through direct YouTubing experience and the emotional involvement deriving from it, it looks like the overall amount of offline resources invested online is much more than the amount of wealth generated online, that can be retrieved and enjoyed offline. There is a resource gap that in this case the net hardly helps bridging. As Barber (2006) states, the internet is a tool and not an aim, and as such it is not effective thinking believing that it can help

overcome discrepancies and societal divides that are deep-rooted into the social tissue, if first we are not ready to re-think our societal structure and highlight the dynamics that make it anti-democratic and unequal primarily offline.

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