BUSINESS

Men who know makeup

Male experts on beauty have attracted enthusiastic followings on digital media

BY CAITLIN KELLY

These beauty bloggers have nailed the perfect cat eye and the art of contouring. They help millions of followers navigate the rocky shoals of choosing the best mascara and the longest-lasting foundation. Some now earn six-figure incomes from their adoring audiences, thanks to partnerships with major brands eager to profit from their street cred.

They're also guys.

They may not be household names, but they do have huge followings. James Charles, a 17-year-old New Yorker who is the first male "face" of CoverGirl mascara, has 1.5 million Instagram followers. Manny Gutierrez, who is known online as Manny Mua, has 3.3 million of them; his followers are known as Mannyacs and his Instagram page leads with the slogan: "I think boys deserve just as much cosmetic recognition."

Online personalities like Mr. Charles and Mr. Gutierrez represent progressive thinking and a fresh take on an old market, said Neil Saunders, a retail analyst who is managing director of GlobalData. "A cutthroat beauty market, where differentiation is vital, has been keen to capitalize on male bloggers," he said.

These bloggers tend to project a very traditionally feminine beauty aesthetic — forget facial hair, think Kardashian-style eyelashes. Many of them are gay and say that their followers' virtual embrace offers powerful reinforcement.

"I came out when I was 12, but I only started doing makeup 18 months ago," Mr. Charles said. "I started doing it on myself, and my parents thought I was transgender. I'm not. It took a lot for me to explain it to them."

Alex Rivera, a 26-year-old beauty blogger from suburban Chicago who is gay, said the world of cosmetics had been "a really great support system" for him, adding, "You feel different because of your sexuality and orientation, but they're a welcoming community."

Mr. Charles, who finished high school this year and moved to Los Angeles, specializes in how-to videos that can take him from 90 minutes to seven hours to produce. In a recent one, called "Valentine's Day Glitter Makeup Tutorial," he shows viewers in just under 12 minutes how to recreate a pink lipstick and eyeliner look. Along the way, he promotes many products by name, as well as a video game that sponsored the segment.

"I've always been an internet kid," Mr. Charles said. "I'd watched makeup tutorials on YouTube for five years, and I started practicing on my friends."

Like other beauty bloggers, he makes money through affiliate deals; by collecting a portion of the sales of the products he promotes; by attending live events; by one-time deals with major brands; and through YouTube advertising.

Fans of Mr. Charles and other male beauty bloggers are heavy consumers — of both the videos and the products they endorse. Jordyn Birden, a 19-year-old student at Virginia Tech, watches five or six male beauty blogs every day, each one about 15 minutes long. "It's like an addiction," she said.

Watching these bloggers has "upped my game" in terms of beauty tricks, Ms. Birden said. "I look at their techniques — how they do their eyeliner — and I pick up their skills," she said. So far she said she had learned "how to create highlights, how to do eyeliner, the glory of highlighting."

"I'd watched makeup tutorials on YouTube for five years, and I started practicing on my friends."

The most successful beauty bloggers use everyday drugstore brands. "They do have an influence on the things I buy," Ms. Birden said. "Most of the time they do recommend things that are affordable to people like us. If the artist doesn't bring up a drugstore brand, it turns you off."

Hillary Kline, 29, who works in public relations in Minneapolis, loves male beauty bloggers. "I like seeing how other people create looks," she said.

Her favorite is Patrick Simondac, known online as Patrick Starrr, who dresses in drag, is sponsored by Smashbox cosmetics and other companies and has 2.1 million YouTube subscribers.

Mr. Simondac is "fun, quirky and creative," Ms. Kline said, adding, "He's one of the prettiest men I've ever seen."

He is also affiliated with the beauty brands Tarte and Benefit, two of Ms. Kline's favorites. "His videos suck you in," she said. "They're really good at selling products."

Some beauty bloggers — and their highly protective managers — zealously guard how much income they are earning. When a cordial Mr. Charles was asked the value of his groundbreaking CoverGirl deal, two managers sitting in on the interview snapped, "His finances are private."

Laura Brinker, a consumer beauty executive at Coty, the parent company of CoverGirl, was equally unforthcoming. "The ways in which CoverGirl partners with influencers are confidential," she said in an email. "These are extremely important relationships, and specific details are competitively sensitive."

"The money talk *is* difficult" because every beauty blogger's goal is to remain relatable, said Mr. Rivera, who posts on Instagram and YouTube under the name @alexfaction. "If they say how much money they're making, it could be alienating."

Mr. Rivera, who has a penchant for skulls and Halloween-style makeup, recently dyed his hair blue ahead of a move to Los Angeles. He knows who his fans are. "You're a warrior for the middle-class using drugstore makeup," Mr. Rivera said. "That's why they're so successful. They're not Beyoncé. They're your best friend."

Thomas Halbert, 20, is another beauty blogger who is moving to Los Angeles (from his native Asheville, N.C.). He has a shock of blond hair and a bit of a Justin Bieber vibe.

"I'm the first person in my family to make quite a lot of money," he said. "For the most part, I grew up very, very poor."

Mr. Halbert said he started creating makeup designs as a way to cope with anxiety and depression. "I found peace in making art," he said. "The next thing you know, I'm going to Walgreens" to buy makeup. "Then, I was kind of lost," he continued. "I just knew I didn't want to go to college."

By the time he was 15, Mr. Halbert was making $1,000 to $3,000 a month from ads on his Tumblr account. This year, all told, he expects to earn $100,000.

Now, he said, "I'm a businessman."

Male beauty blogging began to emerge in 2014, Mr. Rivera said. At the time, he said, about 12 men were doing it; they all knew of one another and were initially collegial. "It was a very close-knit community, trading industry secrets," he said. Today, the field is much more crowded and competitive.

Some businesspeople watch these bloggers for product inspiration. Brent Ridge, a partner in Beekman 1802, a farm and lifestyle store, is coming out with a new line of goat-milk skin care products — an idea that came to him from reading comments on male beauty bloggers' sites. "They're so critical for market research, because they get so many comments," Mr. Ridge said. "What's the overall theme? I'm constantly online reading them and pooling that data."

The rise of male beauty bloggers does not surprise him. "All the way through history, men have been peacocks, and now it's become more and more acceptable," Mr. Ridge said. "If you think about the male customer, they're all taking selfies too, for their Tinder or Grindr profiles."

Another reason male beauty bloggers find faithful followers is their willingness to share their personal lives, as Mr. Charles did in an Instagram post in June: "The past few days of my life have been some of the worst in a long time. I had a boy I really cared about take advantage of me." That post won more than 55,000 likes.

"They're not just giving a makeup tutorial," Mr. Ridge said. "They're telling a story about themselves. If you watch them every day, you're going to get to know them very well."

BRITTANY SOWACKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alex Rivera, a beauty blogger, at his home in Glenview, Illinois. "You're a warrior for the middle-class using drugstore makeup," he said of himself and fellow bloggers.

Box office for U.S. films stalls overseas

LOS ANGELES

Strong dollar is blamed for the end to a decade of global expansion

BY BROOKS BARNES

Hollywood's overseas engine conked out in 2016.

For the last decade, movie studios have relied on the international box office for most of their growth. From 2006 to last year, ticket sales in the United States and Canada increased 20 percent, to $11.4 billion. The foreign box office increased 67 percent in that period, to $27.2 billion.

In some years since 2006, the annual increase in overseas sales has been as high as 14 percent, with markets like China growing rapidly.

So it was startling when the Motion Picture Association of America said Wednesday that overseas ticket sales had zero growth last year, as increases in countries like Brazil and Japan could not offset steep declines elsewhere. Germany was down 13 percent. Britain dropped 10 percent. Mexico plunged 15 percent.

China was flat.

Growth in China was held back by a variety of factors, including a crackdown on box office fraud, fewer ticket subsidies and more discerning consumers. With an eye toward future growth, American studios are trying to increase the number of their films that China allows to be shown. The annual quota is 34 foreign films.

Still, a stronger dollar was the primary culprit for the foreign falloff, the Motion Picture Association of America and the National Association of Theater Owners said on a conference call. "We believe it's purely based on currency issues," said John Fithian, president of the theater owners' association.

Mr. Fithian and Christopher J. Dodd, chief executive of the film association, which represents Hollywood's six biggest studios, said that global ticket sales had increased 1 percent, to $38.6 billion, because of a 2 percent increase in sales in the United States and Canada.

The increase in domestic sales was caused by higher prices; movie theater attendance in the United States and Canada was flat at 1.32 billion.

One unabashedly positive statistic in the 2016 report: After three consecutive years of declines, the number of frequent moviegoers ages 18 to 24 increased 26 percent, to 7.2 million. (Frequent moviegoers are those who went to see one or more films a month.) Improved sound systems, screens and seating options may be helping, the associations said.

"There are key indicators to suggest the future may be even brighter, with increases in attendance among younger demographics," Mr. Dodd said.

An economic transformation that can't help but create tension

ON MONEY

BY JOHN HERRMAN

During a February ride in San Francisco, Travis Kalanick, the chief executive of Uber, was recorded arguing with and eventually berating an Uber driver from the back seat of his car. The driver, who had been working with the company since 2011, accused Mr. Kalanick of undercutting drivers of high-end cars like his, plunging him into bankruptcy. Mr. Kalanick responded with a lecture about the basic economic logic of his company: Soon, the supply of luxury cars on the app would be reduced, causing demand to increase. Besides, he went on, if the company hadn't added a lower-priced tier, it would have been beaten by competitors. This did not satisfy the driver, which seemed to enrage Mr. Kalanick, who erupted into a moralizing tirade. "Some people don't like to take responsibility for their own [expletive]," he said, before leaving the car.

The scene in the clip, obtained and published by Bloomberg, was striking. This wasn't a manufacturing magnate visiting the factory floor or a retail executive paying a surprise visit to a struggling location. Indeed, Mr. Kalanick's ambiguous relationship to the driver was, in a sense, the source of the disagreement between them — a dispute that sailed straight past self-examination into outright hostility.

Uber has spent the beginning of 2017 mired in controversy. There were allegations of sexual harassment and intellectual-property theft; The Times uncovered a brazen effort to thwart the local authorities. These scandals drew scrutiny to Uber's corporate culture. But the recording of Mr. Kalanick shed light on something else: the model around which the company is built.

Uber, like so many other successful tech companies in 2017, is a "platform business," one built around matchmaking between vendors and customers. If successful, a platform creates its own marketplace; if extremely successful, it ends up controlling something closer to an entire economy. This is intuitive in a case like eBay, which connects buyers and sellers. Airbnb, too, resembles an age-old form of commerce, connecting property owners with short-term lodgers. TaskRabbit and Fiverr connect contractors with people looking to hire them. Some of the largest platforms are less obviously transactional: Facebook and Google connect advertisers with users, users with one another, software developers with users. But while the transactions that happen on their platforms largely take a different form — taps, shares, ads served and scrolled past — the principles are essentially the same, as are the benefits. These businesses are asset- and employee-light, low on liability and high on upside. They aspire to monopoly, often unapologetically, and have been instrumental in rehabilitating the concept. (The logic is seductive and often self-evident: Facebook is more useful if everyone is on it, therefore everyone should be on Facebook.)

Predictably, platforms have been intoxicating to investors. They've also been the subject of rapturous business writing. In their 2016 book "Matchmakers: The New Economics of Multisided Platforms," the economists David S. Evans and Richard Schmalensee cast the subject in revolutionary terms, calling for a "new economics" to account for businesses that are "transforming economies" around the world, "making life easier and better for billions of people" — the sort of broad and ideological claim previously reserved by economists for capitalism as a whole.

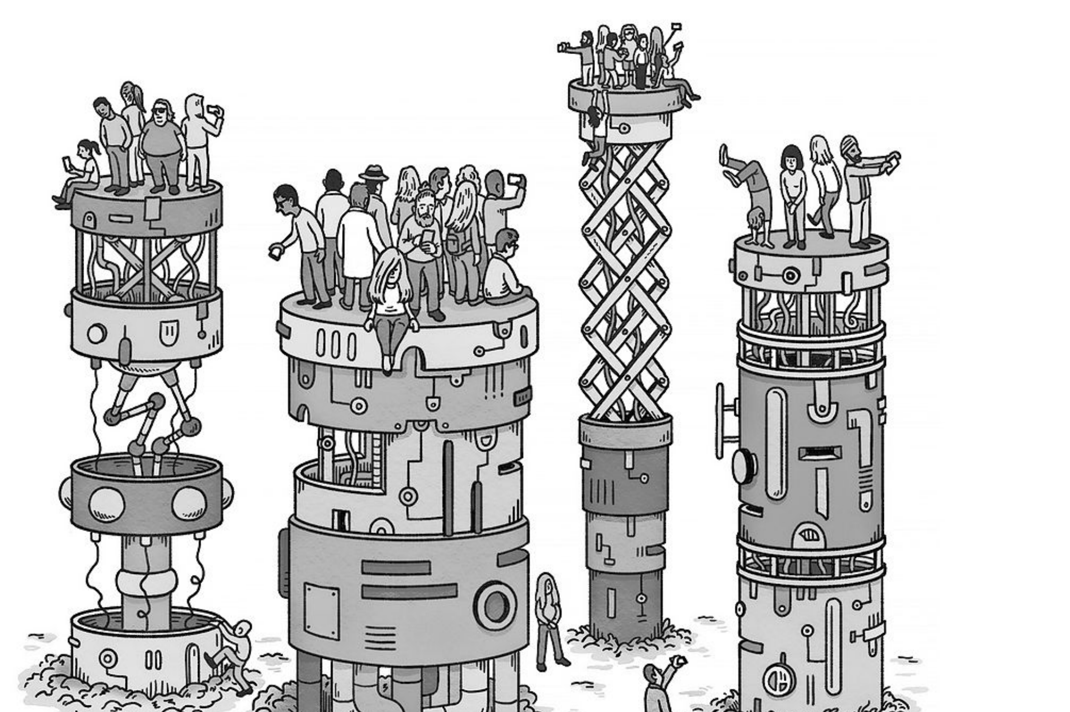
Amid the cheerleading, a comprehensive criticism of the platform model has been slow to emerge. Nick Srnicek's "Platform Capitalism," published in December, tries to situate the rise of platforms in a broader history of capitalism and to project those lessons forward. Mr. Srnicek recasts a few features of platform businesses as potentially problematic. Among them is their tendency to metastasize from transaction enablers to, with sufficient success, participation gatekeepers. A food-delivery app like Seamless begins its life with promises of liberation, connecting customers with nearby restaurants, taking care of payments and eliminating phone calls. But in the cities where it has been most successful, its customer base becomes too big to ignore, even for restaurants that struggle to afford its steep commissions. In other industries, the stakes are much higher. An insurgent Airbnb feels as if it's enabling new types of transactions between previously unconnected people. A dominant Airbnb might come to resemble something between a superintendent and a landlord for millions, not to mention a force reshaping cities in its image.

Platform companies have themselves hired economists to help conceptualize and manage the economies they've created. Google, Airbnb, Uber and Amazon have recruited professors and researchers to help understand what, exactly, they have on their hands and how to expand, regulate and exploit it. Within a rigidly structured platform like Uber, for which the company sets prices, the economic problems are somewhat akin to those of a command economy: How low can we push the cost of a ride before drivers stop participating? (Quite low, for now.) How do we deal with sudden increases in demand? (Surge pricing, controversially.) How might new drivers be both induced to join the platform and compelled to stay? (Through vehicle-financing programs and short-term loan services.)

Platforms are, in a sense, capitalism distilled to its essence. They are proudly experimental and maximally consequential, prone to creating externalities and especially disinclined to address or even acknowledge what happens beyond their rising walls. And accordingly, platforms are the underlying trend that ties together popular narratives about technology and the economy in general. Platforms provide the substructure for the "gig economy" and the "sharing economy"; they're the economic engine of social media; they're the architecture of the "attention economy" and the inspiration for claims about the "end of ownership."

But the tensions that platforms like Uber create with their customers, their workers and the world that surrounds them will soon become harder to ignore, as these companies foment economic and social change, the consequences of which will increasingly be thrust into spectacular display. The Kalanick video was a P.R. nightmare not just for Uber but also for the platform economy in general, posing grand questions about the world it promises, or threatens, to create. The zeal for platforms, combined with the technology industry's internalization of their merits and inevitability, will push them into areas where the tensions they create become starker and the ideologies they carry become more apparent.

For now, the tensions that platforms can breed have been obscured — or at least ignored — in large part because platformized labor has arrived first in sectors where employment was already widely precarious and contract-based, like taxi driving. As the model expands, these tensions may become more visible as workers with more political and social capital are subjected to them. The recent history of platforms, however, has been defined by the failure of all but a few smart or lucky people to imagine just how successful and powerful they can be.



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