Instagram and "the Creative":

An Analysis of Artists KidSuper, DevanOnDeck, and Marlon Craft

by

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Introduction

In this project, I am analyzing three different artists or "creatives" of various mediums, and their use of content strategy to facilitate a personal brand, build an audience, and monetize their platform on Instagram. A "creative" is an individual who solves problems in various new and innovative ways across multiple mediums of art. They are thought leaders who are not afraid to push boundaries and thus create a new set of standards. Creatives inspire others through their gifts and talents; indeed, media scholars have concluded that most social media "influencers" are creatives (Hennessy). In today's digital world, an "influencer" is someone with a high following and engagement through their digital channels; or as some refer to it someone with a lot of "social currency" (Hennessy) Having a large presence on social media amplifies the work artists do in real life. For example, nowadays, a gallery is more likely to book a solo show for an artist with one hundred thousand followers over someone else with less than five thousand. This is because businesses are always looking for easier, cheaper, and faster ways to market their products and services. The artist with more followers can market the show themselves on their platform and increase the odds that people will show up and spend money, reducing the amount of money the gallery has to put forth towards marketing.

Instagram plays an increasingly important role as a platform. It was first launched on October 6, 2010, as a social platform intended for photographers to share photos of their work. With the quick rise in popularity, there came a lot more traffic on the platform. "After one week, Instagram gained 100,000 followers and reached one million users exactly two months and two weeks after" (Latiff and Safiee). As of June 2018, there are one billion active Instagram users

on the platform (West); 67% of users were between the ages of 18-29 years old (Perrin and Anderson).

The three artists with a presence on Instagram whose work I am analyzing for this project obtain a level of creative vision that is often hard to come across, as well as a level of influence that has amassed as a result. Instagram gives them ample opportunity to fabricate their own narrative as to exactly how they want to enter, impact, and solidify themselves within their respective industries and culture as we know it. One of the artists I am analyzing here is KidSuper, a Brooklyn-based fashion designer whose fashion brand encompasses the ethos of "Living Life Super" and "being your own creative superhero." His career demonstrates the importance of brand messaging and making early distinctions of what is and is not on-brand. His Instagram feed shows the gravity of monetizing one's audience and creating awareness through direct marketing. Branding allows him to stand out in saturated markets, and creating different ideas around his work allows for the opportunity to scale at great length. The more one can create a world around their product or concept, the more they are on their way to creating a sustainable brand. To this end, I will also be analyzing the work of DevanOnDeck, an influencer whose YouTube videos focus on men's fashion, style and tech. While his main audience is on YouTube, he spent his early days in the digital space solidifying himself on Instagram through his imaginative content. His main goal is to be able to design and sell his very own footwear. However, he is using his knowledge of content marketing and social media strategy to collaborate with various fashion brands on Instagram in areas where they could improve their business. Lastly, I will be analyzing Marlon Craft, a 26-year-old emcee from Hell's Kitchen, in New York City, whose dissimilar use of video sets him apart from other rappers on Instagram

and thus makes him an entrancing case study. He uses his video as an opportunity to tell his story in ways other rappers do not, namely by avoiding the traditional braggadocious approach. In my analysis, I will be using both the recently developed terms used to discuss social media in two of the many new advice books aimed at helping creatives and those who want to be creatives (Hennessy and Vaynerchuk) as well as recent scholarly articles about social media (see my Works Cited).

Part I: KidSuper

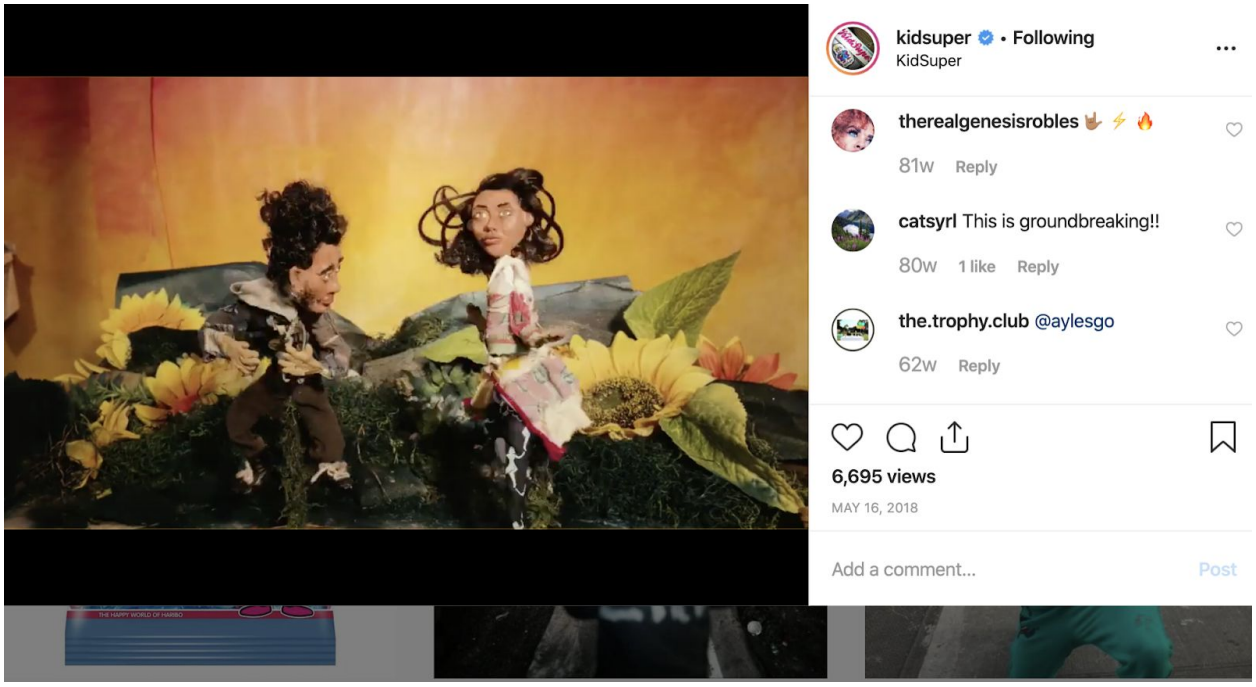
Colm Dillaine, aka KidSuper, is a Brooklyn-based fashion designer, visual artist, and director whose brand, "KidSuper," encapsulates the essence of what it means to be a young creative across various mediums; but beyond that, his brand, presented through Instagram, is expressive of his outlook on life and the importance of optimism and perseverance (Winter). "I was this little kid that thought I could do anything," he explains of the name KidSuper. "Like no one's gonna teach us how, and we're gonna just work 10 times harder than everyone." The initial intent for the business was to create a t-shirt brand. However, fast forward to present day, it has cultivated the essence of being a collective of thinkers, creators, ideas, and products with a headman to lead the operation. The name KidSuper serves as both his alias and the name of his brand, allowing Dillaine to lineup with whichever sector of his creativity he chooses and to assert himself as a fashion designer, fine artist, actor, producer, director, etc. While the purpose of his Instagram feed is beyond asserting himself as a master, he has an effortless approach to doing just that, thus fostering an audience who respects and supports him as such both monetarily and morally.

I first discovered this artist while scrolling through Instagram and coming across a piece of content that he created in collaboration with Champs Sports, an American sports retailer that works as a subsidiary of Foot Locker. It was a stop-motion claymation video introducing a new colorway of Timberland boots that were to be released that season. As I did my research and delved into his Instagram, I stumbled upon a few other videos of the same style. One of them was a music video for the song called "Mercury Rising" by theMIND. The video is about two young kids from Chicago working to transcend their environment, whilst in a space where

people usually never leave. KidSuper uses these clay protagonists to enhance the lyrics of the artist and to add a touching element to the song as well when paired with the visual.

The way in which Colm Dillane and KidSuper's new video blends lyrics and melody seamlessly can also be found in the rapper Russ's music video "Cherry Hill," which is another claymation approach. The video begins with a shot of a woman who is used as a metaphor for everything Russ wants and is working for in this life. The song alludes to being/falling in love, and the song compliments that with a shot of the girl being chased off a cliff by Russ. Russ is an American rapper, singer, songwriter, and producer, who is best known for his illustrious singles

about love and his relationship to his work as an artist.



By the end of the video, all that is left is Russ sitting alone in his old basement studio in making music, letting the viewer know that with everything stripped away, he will continue to make music.

These videos appear to be so playful and genuine, but simultaneously very well thought out. This sparked an idea for me; through observation I understood that one can portray various parts of their creativity without having to separate themselves from it. Branding allowed it to become part of an ecosystem of creativity. It creates context for everything that is to come from the artist.Through further research, I began to acquire a better understanding of who Kidsuper is and what he does. The main types of content posted to his Instagram are pictures and videos, and while that remains consistent, the subject matter is always changing. In what follows, I will analyze some of the content of his Instagram in order to demonstrate the links between self-branding, the Instagram platform, and the community that coalesces around the creative.

In the post below, Dillaine or Kidsuper sits astride a bull in front of a quintessential red barn, wearing a hot pink tracksuit while sipping tea from a delicate china cup in front of shelves of china. His post is a play on the expression "a bull in a china shop." What is most striking is that the bull is massive, so massive that the image must have been photoshopped. What Kidsuper is telling us that he is the proverbial "bull in the china shop." He is here in his gender-bending clothing and makeup to upend things, to unsettle norms. The size of the bull is a testimony to how much he will be unsettling things, while the china cup he has in hand makes clear that he is going to unsettle things with finesse.

In another post (below), we see a photo of Dillaine being shot from a low angle, symbolizing him as someone of power, or a hierarchy in his field. Simultaneously he is standing in front of a building bearing his alias and the name of his brand, “KidSuper.” This building is a New York City building and it has been painted Tiffany blue, which is mainly associated with luxury and sophistication. He is wearing a t-shirt that reads “New York” with flowers and plants on it as well, alluding to New York City. The idea here is that the city is a big garden, which is a play on Madison Square Garden. Dillaine’s hair is out and has not yet been tamed, giving him this look reminiscent of a lion. As his tag for the photograph indicates, he is the lion that ran through the garden. This picture tells the audience that Kidsuper is the main focal point of this big city, where he, the lion or the king, of this concrete jungle resides.

Kidsuper is both an artist and an all encompassing clothing brand that serves as the backbone for an entire creative operation. With the Kidsuper brand, it is exemplary of how boundaries within the world of art and between art and commerce are being broken down. Everything he is able to do under this alias can all be brought back to this one simple idea that the brand represents, “Live life super.”

Another strategy that Kidsuper often uses is celebrity endorsements. Although it is clear that the promotion is not paid promotion, they are in fact pictures and videos of celebrities caught wearing some of his pieces. Nevertheless, these pieces of content can be found spread throughout his Instagram feed. They are used to attract people to buy the product. According to one scholar, “Celebrity endorsement is a popular method for improving the advertisements effectiveness. The use of celebrity endorsement has become a trend and a perceived winning formula to build corporate image and increase image” (Vidyanta). The effectiveness of the message being communicated by an endorser depends on attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness as perceived by the consumers.

Platforms such as Instagram, where one can create their very own platform and be seen and heard at scale in a way that was only reserved for people on television, allow creatives to have a voice and share themselves and their point of view with an audience that with proper strategy and great content will actually care about what they have to say and will eventually convert into paying customers of a particular product. The way in which Kidsuper allows the public to get involved and support him is by giving them access to purchasing these clothing pieces that he creates by hand. Wearing Kidsuper is a symbol for a lot of people. It symbolizes that they are different and for the most part know “what's up.” It symbolizes that they stand with

the brand and they too are about this idea of living life super and on their own terms, whether they are creative or not. This is something that is very relatable to young people, but I am sure elders can remember a time where they too felt that way and sometimes still wish they could. While there have been brands in the past that have tried to capture that same essence in what is mainly known as a streetwear brand, Kidsuper uses it as a sort of juxtaposition. In the Tiffany blue post, KidSuper appears to be very serious, despite what the copy might imply. The sophistication that the Tiffany color lends juxtaposes his childlike brand messaging of being a creative superhero.

In a very different grey-tone post (above), Dillaine is sitting in front of what seems to be a wall of which he has drawn a kitchen setting. He is holding a bag of cereal high into the air as

it falls into a bowl. The photo is not as colorful and in your face as Dillaine's posts usually are, giving him a humanizing and gentle look. It is vastly different, certainly, from the above bull post where he is made to seem and look larger than life. Sitting in front of a scene that he has created lets the audience know that regardless of how he portrays himself, it is exactly the way he envisions it. It is calculated and he still is creating the world around him no matter what.

One of the strengths of Instagram is that it allows creatives to post "carousels," or a post containing multiple images or videos through which the viewer can scroll. The rest of the photos in this particular carousel bear that same color scheme and feeling.

In this second image in the carousel, Dillaine has shot himself from what is referred to in film as a "GOD" angle or a high angle. He is being looked down upon by the camera, and

ultimately the viewer. This is a humbling moment for KidSuper, humanizing himself with something with which everyone is familiar. He is not flashing any of his KidSuper branding through the photos. One can even assume that he is not even wearing his own designs in this photo. These images are a testament to his vision and exactly how far it stretches; also how he does not seem to be stressing about his various projects that are happening all at once, but more so taking a moment to appreciate everything over a simple bowl of cereal. These ideas of humility are again reinforced by the black and white color choice. The absence of color in the photo is a tool used to remove the subject from reality. This causes the viewer to connect to the image in more of an emotional way, as opposed to presenting colors that capture the eye.

From analyzing KidSuper we learn about the power of branding and how when used properly, one can move freely throughout different creative fields or forms of art. It is often said that it is best practice for someone to decide on one thing they are good at and stick to that entirely. This model debunks that idea and proves that one can fulfill each area in their career that they would like. We also find out just how powerful the Instagram platform is in regards to people spreading their own brand in order to sell product and monetize content. By understanding exactly who he is marketing to and creating this content for, he is able to be in direct conversation with his audience at all times.

From reviewing KidSuper, we learn there are various components that need to come together to create a sustainable brand. We also get an idea of the power associated with selling a feeling as an artist. Being able to provide the audience with a specific feeling and attribute it back to this concept each time something new is achieved or created. It further tells the story of

the progression of the creative, as well as serves as an umbrella for various creative endeavours going forward.

Part II: DevanOnDeck

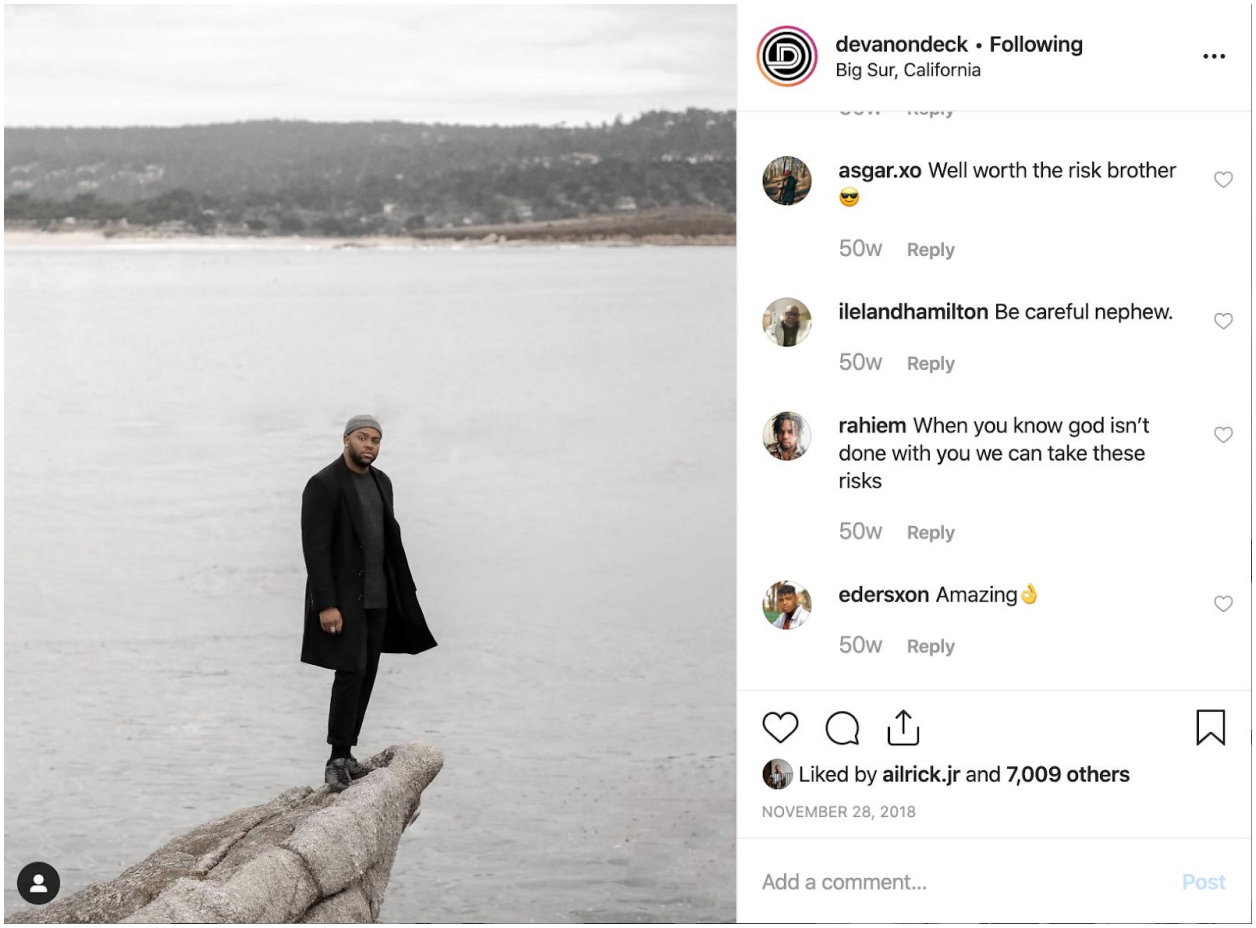
DevanOnDeck is a menswear fashion and tech influencer who has worked vigorously to build his name through his very imaginative and style-driven Instagram content. Born and raised in Oakland, California, he studied menswear with a focus on footwear design at the Academy of Arts University from which he dropped out after about three years of study. He understood that he had reached the peak of knowledge that college could offer him as it pertained to his career. He was interested in garnering an audience and profiting off of his footwear designs. Devan is now a menswear media authority or entrepreneur, who has been linking his fashion knowledge, modern style, and guerrilla tactics in order to create a newly formalized digital marketing strategy that is dominating various categories in menswear. His career began in the early 2010s when he was managing various retail stores. With no degree, DevanOnDeck's impressive digital portfolio landed him a position as one of the first employees of Snapchats' content team where he began to learn more about the digital space. He later decided to leave Snapchat to pursue a full time career as a digital marketer (DeAcetis). This theme of risk taking and not being afraid to push boundaries would ultimately be a part of his main presence online. As an influencer, he is constantly sharing all of his secrets that have made him succeed within the digital space. These include how to make moving images, different photo effects (as in the image below where Devan is sitting on a stool with a monochromatic themed outfit with his head about four times its size and a CTA or a "call to action" to direct the viewer to the sneakers he is wearing), and cool edits to personify one's style, namely the very things that made him stand out in the first place. He first built his name on Instagram, posting content that was exciting and imaginative. Heavily inspired by anime, he would make content of himself mimicking his favorite characters. Using

flying photos and floating sneakers, he fuses two versions of him together both creatively, and within his content; there is a YouTube tutorial for that as well.

Taking risks is a common theme throughout Devan's content. On YouTube, you will find him discussing men's fashion tips that are meant to highlight what most would find as insecurities and shine a light on them. He grew a rapport as he began reaching out to independent menswear brands on Instagram and offering to help them with their content strategy. Through this practice, he has become masterful at attaining brand and consumer relationships that he is now able to leverage because of his personal brand. Some brands he has collaborated with include Christin Louboutin, Paul Smith, Cartier, GAP, and GQ.

Of the three artists I have chosen to analyze for my senior project, it is safe to say that Devan has the most well thought out plan as far as how he represents himself in the digital space. His grid on Instagram (below) carries a toned down theme, allowing the colors from his outfits to be the main focus; helping him achieve a clean and concise look throughout his feed. If you pay attention closely, you begin to recognize the strategy behind his content.

Achieving a clean feed on Instagram has become essential when building a personal brand. On this platform, the goal is to promote a certain lifestyle to your followers that is almost tangible. In what follows, I will analyze his Instagram content, starting with the image below.



Here Devan is standing on the edge of a cliff over a huge body of water. This is a dangerous picture choice being as with any sudden misstep, he can fall and possibly die. What Devan is saying is that he is a risk-taker in life as he is with his fashion style and the type of content he produces on different platforms. He is not afraid to try new things - but more importantly he is not afraid to be completely transparent about what he does and how he does it. This is crucial to his success, especially in a space where sharting things like fashion tips and

men's grooming tips is not really common. Another post (below) shows two different images of DevanOnDeck standing side by side one another. One is wearing a jacket while the other is not, and both are sporting different gestures with their arms. This is a prime example of the inventful piece of content that initially brought him attention on Instagram. This type of content would first be introduced on Instagram with a CTA in the caption that brings the viewer's attention directly to the effect. He uses this as a way of bringing awareness and hype to what he has just revealed. He later follows up with a post in his story or main feed asking his audience if he should create a YouTube tutorial; is that something they would like to learn? The clothing does not have branding on them, which lets us know it is more of a minimal brand, aligning perfectly with DevanOnDeck. He later tags each brand in the caption. This cycle of content allows for opportunities to monetize in various ways. One is getting paid per post from the fashion brands he has tagged. Another is the demand of the YouTube video to teach the photo effect that he has introduced, which will bring him ad revenue on the YouTube platform. In this post he has on four different garments from four different brands, all of which he has tagged in the caption.

With carrying the label of a fashion influencer, it is clear that those in position are meant to be viewed as leaders in their field. They are often being asked about the pieces they garner, which in turn, leads to fashion content that is valuable to their audience. This serves as another form of market research, or the action of gathering information about consumers' needs and preferences. Accessories in particular that DevanOnDeck's audience knows to be his "signature" are the various bracelets and rings he wears on his hands. The post (below) shows Devan sporting his entire jewelry collection on one arm. In the caption, he is acknowledging all of the past questions he has received about his accessories, letting his fans know that he pays attention to their wants and needs. He is also reminding them that he is open to sharing even his most personal secrets that create his signature style. Simultaneously, the post showing off his jewelry

collection also dubs as an advertisement for the brand that created his custom rings with his logo on them. This is confirmed by the #ad hashtag influencers are required to use when involved in paid promotion. This post, like the few before, serve multiple purposes and creative various streams of income. He has been paid prior to make the Instagram post by the brand who provided the custom rings, and, within the post is a CTA to view his YouTube video about the rest of his jewelry collection (which has the potential to receive payment from brands) where ad revenue is generated.

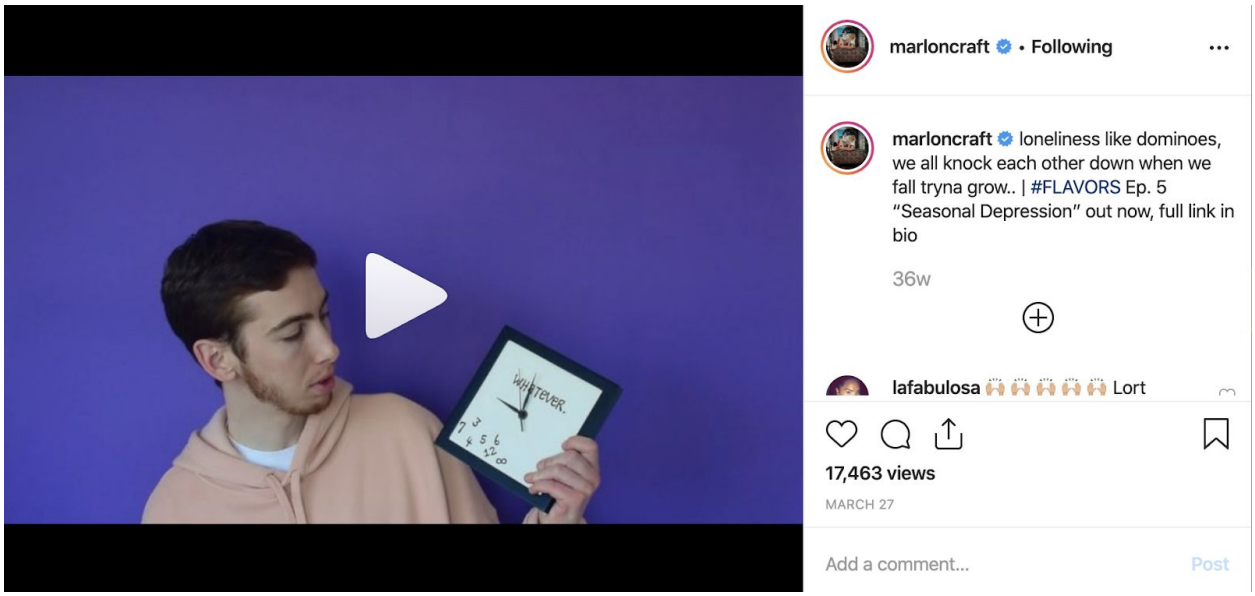
From analyzing the content strategy of DevanOnDeck, we learn the importance of maintaining a presence on the platform that is nuanced and indicative of one's particular style. These examples of posts from his Instagram feed collectively show the viewer that his outfits are

often his primary focus, and that he has a strong sense of who he is and how he wants to portray himself. Evidently, Devan's strategy is simple and effective, yet it requires an intense level of planning ahead and consistency. Studying him, we see the value of tethering each platform together in subtle ways in a drive to monetize off of the same online traffic. Furthermore, we understand the significance of providing immense value to our audience in order to gain their trust.

Marlon Craft

Marlon Craft is a rapper from Hell's Kitchen, New York, whose music and sound is heavily inspired by the city around him. Some of his biggest inspirations range from Prodigy to Jadakiss. When examining the Instagram page of Marlon Craft, it is clear that he has a structured strategy that allows him to present himself as he pleases to his fans and others that are coming across him for the first time.

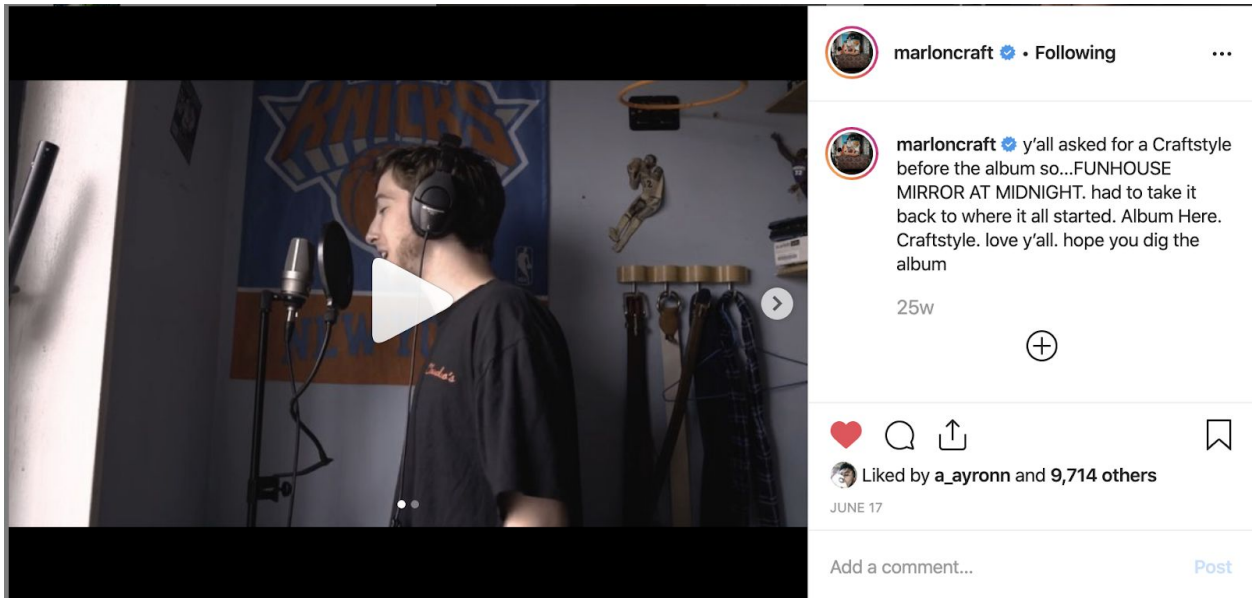
I was first introduced to Marlon Craft through Instagram. Someone that we both mutually follow posted about opening up at one of his shows. When I clicked on his page, I was surprised to see his follower count well in the tens of thousands. He was also "verified" on Instagram really early in his career (meaning that Instagram recognized him as being who he said he is and not someone posing as him). This let me know that he had some sort of record/publishing deal, as Instagram only gives out verification checks for artists of that status no matter the following. They are also given out to people who can be recognized at scale on other platforms as well. As I continued to scroll I understood why. Below is a cover photo of a *#FLAVORS* video on Instagram.



Flavors is a series of different videos where Marlon is standing in front of different colored backgrounds while rapping. The name correlates with the different colored backdrops and really works and ties them together. It is not specific whether or not he is rapping something brand new from that day, or maybe testing an old unreleased verse to see how it works with his audience. #FLAVORS is something profound because it allows him to try out different things and measure the response for his audience. These videos are different from regular videos, or the traditional way of letting one's audience know that a new song or freestyle has been released. The videos often include different immersive and interactive elements to them that really hold the viewer's attention. In one case where he is rapping about not having time in his day-to-day, he is handed a clock to look at in a choreographed manner that really adds to the story by creating a visual to go along with the lyrics. Craft's #FLAVORS video series is a prime example of what you will come across on social media that works: content with simple names and themes that match (i.e. flavors - alongside different bright/fruity colored backdrops). With a connection as simple and as broad as that, there are no rules or guidelines to follow as to what Flavors has to

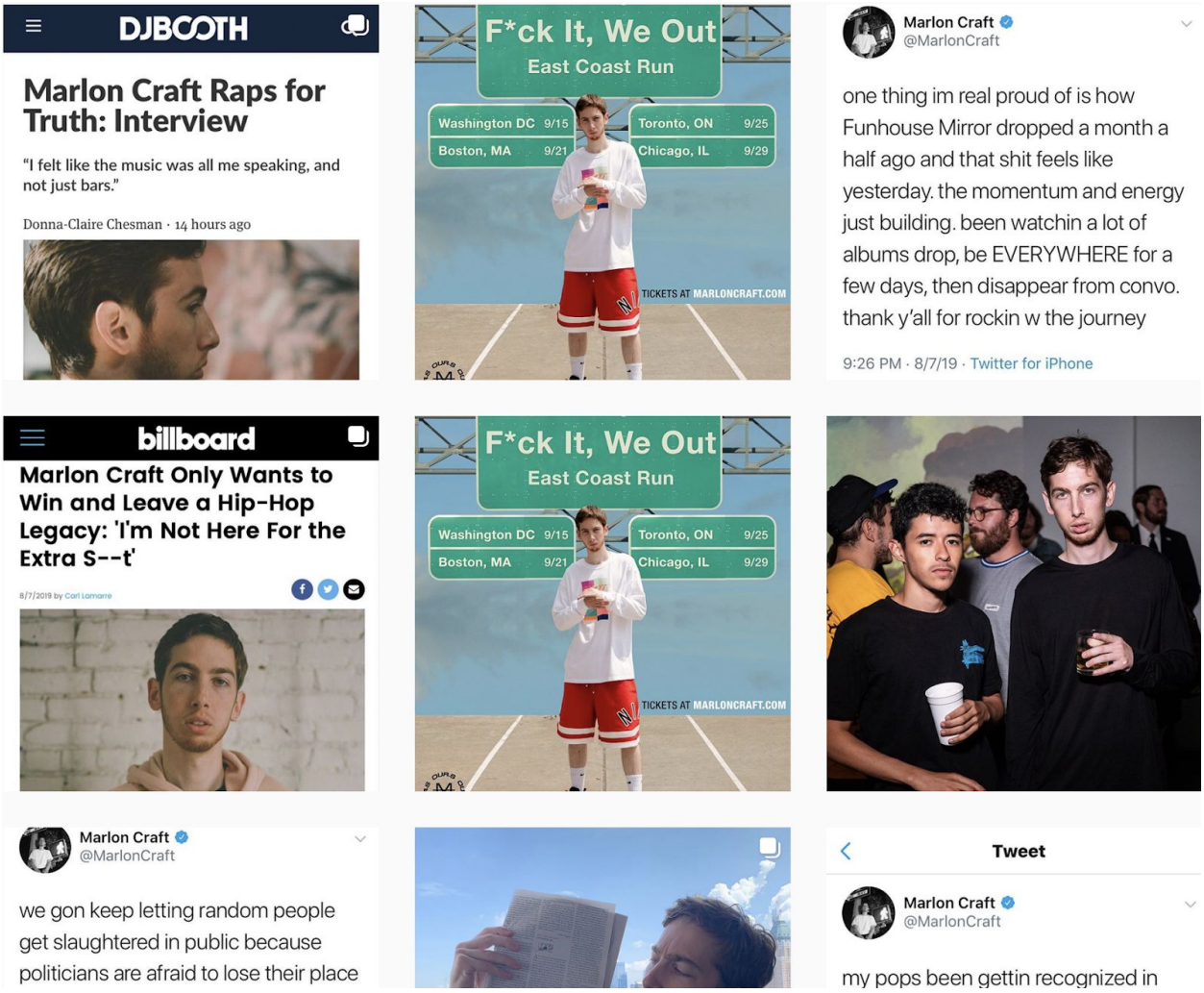
be about. The open-endedness of the title leaves the opportunity for his rapping to be the main focus. The episode becomes fully immersive then into what he is talking about while still maintaining its certain style.

Video seems to play a big role in Marlon's content strategy. Taking a look at his YouTube profile, it seems that he takes videos that are posted on YouTube and repurposes them for Instagram. The key here is leveraging content from other platforms and making it special for Instagram. The translation could possibly add a different perspective of it within the caption, or simply changing the format to fit the screen for Instagram. Aside from the Flavors video series, he also has a freestyle series entitled "Craftstyle." Taking the word freestyle and adding his name to the front is one of the simplest and most effective ways to create something new out of an already existing entity. This simple change alone is effective and begins building a community around the artist.



Marlon's Craftstyle videos are opportunities for him to let the world know how he is feeling, and where he is at with himself in that moment. He often delivers a freestyle rap or

potentially a verse he would like to test on his audience. These videos each take place in his childhood bedroom, where he has created all of his early work, and first began his dreams of becoming a rapper. He also has a Knicks poster hanging on his wall, connecting him to his New York roots and complementing the style in which he brings to his raps.



In the post (above) we have a visual representation of a portion of Craft's feed on Instagram. It is clear that there is not much attention paid to maintaining a specific theme throughout the grid, as we saw with DevanOnDeck.. There are two posts introducing publications in which he has been featured, two posts promoting his tour at the time, and a few

twitter posts. Marlon Craft uses posts made on Twitter, another social platform where users communicate in small messages called Tweets. He posts only the tweets that are controversial or will spark conversation within the comment section. These are opportunities to drive engagement in a positive way, as well as tether both his Instagram and Twitter following. Posted (below) is an example of a tweet being repurposed for Instagram that will bring engagement up in the comments, and ultimately serves Craft as market research.

In analyzing Marlon Craft's Instagram, we get a feel of the importance of connecting with fans as an artist first hand. His platform allows him to converse and gain an understanding of what his fans are looking for and how he can keep them close as his brand grows. The main focus is to promote and progress his career as a rapper. It is meant to serve as a highlight reel for his creative achievements, as well as allowing him to personally connect to his dearest fans. Craft also showcases how approaching something as textbook as a rap freestyle with a genuinely creative approach can assist in creating a culture around his work.

Conclusion

In examining these artists, I have learned the necessity of maintaining a personal brand on social media and the importance of standing out in a strategic way. Like anything else, accumulating a following is a time consuming process, and mainly the goal should be to build something that lasts. Posting content aimlessly is counter productive, as it can mislead your audience as to who you are and what you do. The importance of good quality content that appears genuine is the underlying theme that connects these three successful creatives. They do not stray too far away from what has brought them success from the beginning.

In watching KidSuper, we get a better understanding of the importance of brand messaging. Through his brand, KidSuper is able to maintain a collection of works that fall under the same umbrella. We also learn the need for consistency within creating work and posting it. Having a consistent feed of content allows the audience to feel as if they are growing with you throughout your journey. From DevanOnDeck, we learn the importance of maintaining a consistent image throughout different social platforms, which can be brought back to creating a viable strategy for posting content. Devan uses content across multiple platforms and thereby increases his chances of monetizing his online presence. This is effective because he often satisfies different markets within one singular post. He proves the importance for creatives to acquire the essence of an influencer because he is leveraging his connections with brands he has worked with to further his main goal of designing his own footwear. Through the process, he is able to receive various streams of income, while building a fan base that will surely sell out his first run of footwear when the time comes. Lastly, New York Emcee Marlon Craft teaches us the importance of creating brand identity through original content. This is important because it helps

carry the art that he creates to a wide audience, while simultaneously creating different parts of his brand identity. Reclaiming freestyle as a “craftstyle” is clever and allows for more opportunities to monetize. Some examples are through the creation of merchandise. Marlon’s most memorable FLAVORS moments could be translated through a t-shirt and later be sold to fans, ultimately creating another line of revenue for the artist to continue to grow. This all comes back to using content to create a world around your work for the audience to buy into.

Each of these creatives provides valuable strategy that can be applied to my own personal work as an artist. At this point in my art career, I am particularly focused on scaling my operation and reaching as many people as I can who are within a specific niche. Streamlining content from different social networking platforms together is a tactic I would like to facilitate in my own way. By achieving multiple sources of income, I can reinvest more money into working with better materials, as well as creating higher quality products. Furthermore, by building a big enough following, I can generate income solely on paid promotion and ad revenue, thus removing the usual stresses of being a fulltime creative and allowing me to create from a more focused place.

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