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7.01M Online

https://stories.complex.com/saweetie-cover-story-2021/

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJj3JOkXDvM

"Not only did she make her rap dreams come true with chart-topping hits, she has monetized her likeness in a way that feels like a small sliver of redemption. And she's done it on her own terms."


MARC ECKŌ'S
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SAWEETIE
ALL CONSUMING

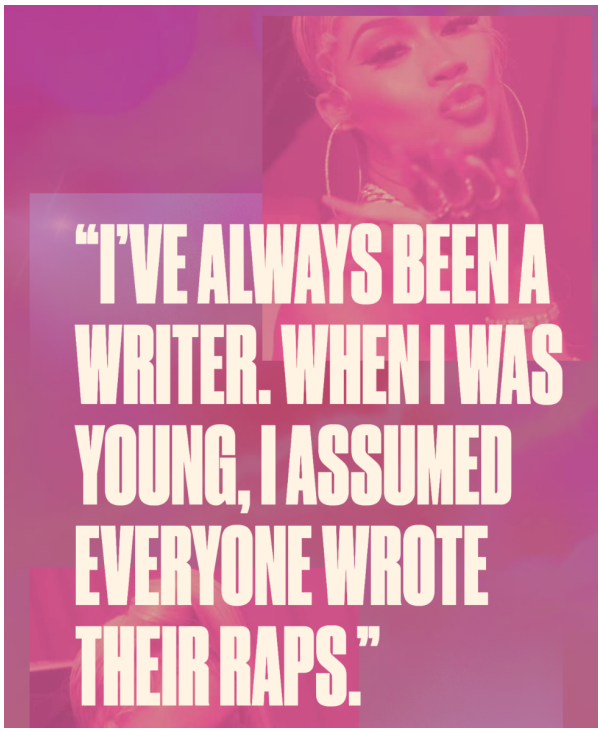
SAWEETIE'S ART OF INFLUENCE

Saweetie is a rapper, CEO, creative director, and content queen who figured out how to bottle up and sell her persona (and music) to a distracted generation. Here's how she and her team do it.

Words by Aria Hughes
Photography by Alexandra Gavillet

"I know that's right!" is peak Black vernacular. I remember hearing it as a child on Black sitcoms during the '90s and from older family members who used the term as a form of encouragement for the most mundane and the most major of life occurrences. Make the honor roll? "I know that's right!" Finish all of your vegetables? "I know that's right!" It's an exclamation and a head nod wrapped in one.

Saweetie, the 26-year-old rapper who claims the Bay and Sacramento, has helped revive the saying for a younger generation. (You might have seen the #ikdr hashtag, which stands for "I know dats right!") She peppers it in her speech, sometimes adding extra words for emphasis. "I know that's mothafuckin' right!" she said after scoring points in a game of beer pong. Or sometimes she flips it. "I know that's right, and never, ever wrong," she said while jetskiing in heart-shaped goggles and a pink shower cap to protect her weave. The saying has become so closely attached to her that when Cardi B released her hit single "Up," which featured the phrase on the hook ("Broke boys don't deserve no pussy/ I know that's right!"), commenters on IG Live questioned why she didn't just have Saweetie say it. Cardi said she would have, but it completely slipped her mind.



"I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A WRITER. WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I ASSUMED EVERYONE WROTE THEIR RAPS."

Like most things Black people naturally do, you don't realize there's an art to it until someone who isn't Black attempts to do it. I observe that while on set for Saweetie's *Icy University*, a campy YouTube series that offers fun and informative mini-courses about things like how to get over a "fuckboy" or how to start a business. We're in a studio in Burbank, California, a sleepy city outside of Los Angeles that borders the mountains, when I hear a white producer loudly say, "I know that's right!" and I'm caught off guard. The producer isn't mocking Saweetie in that "sistah-girl" way. But I still can't help but giggle to myself because it just sounds...different. She's reading off a script and acting as Smooches, a pearlescent pink pair of lips that Saweetie interacts with during the Icy University courses. And the phrase stumbles out of her mouth rather than rolls off her tongue. The inflection is off, the cadence isn't right, and the intonation isn't what I'm used to.

Saweetie doesn't use the term that often while on set—she's very focused on landing her script and hosting her guests—but when she does say it, it's with a certain *je ne sais quoi* that's hard to replicate. She sounds familiar, like your favorite auntie. And with little effort she's turned this commonly used saying into her own unique signature and selling point.

Less than five years after she officially released her songs to the world, Saweetie has developed multiple signatures outside of music that she's been able to monetize. A lot of them are present on the set of *Icy University*. There are Flamin' Hot Cheetos bags on the craft services

table. There's her assistant sitting near her fuchsia Birkin bag, and her hairstylist armed and ready with a baby hair brush. And, of course, there's "IKDR!," which is sprinkled into the *Icy University* script. Saweetie has used these signatures as source material for vignettes, videos, and skits, which she distributes over multiple platforms, including Instagram (where she has 11.8 million followers), TikTok (4.2 million followers), Twitter (1.7 million followers), and YouTube (2.34 million subscribers).

Saweetie's skits and videos often go viral and have led to lucrative brand partnerships, brought more attention to her songs, and have helped her capture our attention despite being more distracted than ever. She's indicative of what it takes to become a big artist in 2021, which involves diversifying revenue streams and selling a personal brand in this attention economy. Musicians don't usually make content in the way Saweetie does, but everyone with an internet presence who wants to be seen is figuring out how to gain market share. Many artists these days break on the internet, but Saweetie's being very intentional and strategic about the content she posts, all while building a loyal and highly engaged audience that connects to both her music and her interests. She's a CEO, creative director, rapper, actress (she played Indigo, a hard-to-please rapper, on Season 3 of *Grown-ish*), and a content queen, a new title she's embraced. During an episode of Complex's *GOAT Talk*, when asked what her favorite Instagram account is, she speaks in third person, using her government name. "Greatest IG account? I'mma have to say Diamonté Harper, again." She then proceeds to talk about how people have reacted to her content. "According to other people," she clarifies. "I don't want it to be a self-proclaimed thing, because I think that's kind of corny, but me and my team really did our thing with content, and we separated ourselves and we kind of became a blueprint for what content-meets-music means."

This blueprint was devised by Saweetie and Sabrina Brazil, her good friend who she knew as a child—their fathers were in jail together—but grew closer with while they attended the University of Southern California. Brazil helps the rapper create all of her content across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Today, Brazil is an official, full-time Saweetie team member, and the rapper's right-hand woman, who is currently running around the set while eight months pregnant. During the *Icy University* shoot, Saweetie, who is a perfectionist, looks to Brazil when she gets tripped up on the script (which Brazil wrote) or if something doesn't sound completely natural. "How would we say that?" she asks Brazil, who makes tweaks and suggestions on the fly.

Brazil says she and Saweetie started creating content long before people paid attention to what they put on their IG accounts and before the word "content" was used as it is today. "There's a misconception that Saweetie came from money, but really, we were just selling the dream," says Brazil. "We were hopping fences in Beverly Hills to get the shot. [Saweetie] would be like, 'Who am I today?' And I would say, 'I want you to be Scarface. That's who you are.' And we would sell that story." She adds, "So everything we did, we wanted people to feel impacted by it, because early social media content wasn't a big deal. People were just living their lives. I remember girls who are pretty famous now, but back then they were on their way up, but they'd come to me and ask, 'Can you take pictures of me like you take pictures of Saweetie?' People started feeling the vibe, and the vibe was definitely selling it."

At first, Brazil was taking pictures of Saweetie modeling her Furléte brand. There's a shot from 2017 of Saweetie sitting on top of a car with palm trees in the background wearing a peach-colored faux fur bikini top and white sweatpants. The vibe was pretty rich girl in California. But as Saweetie got more popular, she wanted to educate her fans and show her personality. A Q&A on Instagram Live wasn't quite the answer, Saweetie says, so instead they created something entirely different and unique: *Icy University.*

Launched during the pandemic, Saweetie says *Icy University* was a give-back to her fans. She paid for the first season's production costs out of her own pocket, but because of the series' popularity—each episode draws around half a million views—Season 2 is being sponsored by Oculus, the Facebook-owned company that makes and sells virtual reality headsets. It will give fans an immersive, 360-degree view of a virtual *Icy University* campus that includes a quad full of money trees and a water fountain made from diamonds. And Saweetie will interview famous guests who discuss topics like self-love and mental health.

On the set of *Icy University*, she's standing behind a desk that's holding a laptop, stapler, pen case, and mug, all covered in rhinestones, along with a hot pink fur-trimmed binder. She's wearing a Champagne-colored crop top with a pastel floral print and a tight matching skirt that she tugs on between shots. As she recites the script she waves a rhinestone pen accentuated with a hot pink ball of fur through the air. "I-n-d-e-p-e-n-d-e-n-t, do you know what that means?" Saweetie says, mimicking rapper Boosie and moving the pen back and forth with each syllable. Saweetie

Boosie and moving the pen back and forth with each syllable. Saweetie has the ability to make you feel a little dull because she literally shines. If the light isn't bouncing off her many diamond necklaces, it's hitting her glossy lips or her shimmery cheek highlighter, which a cameraman mistakes for something that's not supposed to be there. "There's something white on her face," he says. Her makeup artist attempts to fix it, until they realize what he's referring to and start to laugh. "That's cute," Saweetie says with a chuckle and a pacifying tone. "It's highlighter. It's meant to highlight your cheekbones."


“CREATIVES NEED TO BE PAID.”

Saweetie, born Diamonté Quiava Valentin Harper, didn't have a glossy upbringing. Her mother, Trinidad Valentin, who is Filipino and Chinese, was 17 when she was born. Saweetie's father, Johnny Harper, is Black. The rapper says because her parents were young, she remembers always being babysat by different people and moving around Northern California. But she spent a chunk of her adolescence in Hayward, California, a city 20 minutes south of Oakland, and for a few years she lived with her father in the Lord Tennyson Apartments, a low-income housing development named after Alfred Tennyson, a British poet from the 1800s. Saweetie says because of where she lived, she grew up fast. Her father would do things like cut out articles about abducted kids and show them to her before she played outside, which helped her develop a hyper awareness.

"I remember walking home from school and feeling like I was being followed, but I made sure I did things to make sure I wasn't a target," she says nonchalantly. Despite her surroundings, she credits a strong support system with pushing her to be her best self. Her mother, a former video vixen who appeared in videos like Nelly's "Ride Wit Me" and DMX's "What They Really Want," taught her to be independent at a young age. "She was just on top of me and she didn't play about me being successful, because she knew how smart I was and she knew my potential," says Saweetie, who calls her a "Tiger Mom." She lived with her grandmother Roxane Harper, who has nine kids (her IG handle is, appropriately, @theymomma), on and off. Saweetie watched her grandmother, a former Miss Black Nebraska, juggle working as a real estate agent and taking care of her family, all while looking good. Saweetie says she taught her poise, and to have seven streams of income. She also influenced Saweetie's rap name—she called her Sweetie DiDi as a child.

At 14, Saweetie decided she wanted to be a rapper, but she knew she had to get out of Sacramento, where she went to high school, to make that happen. She would attend San Diego State for two years, doing random things like auditioning to be the school's first female mascot ("I was bored," she says) and not-so-random things like joining the drill team. Then she transferred to USC, in Los Angeles, to study communications and business, and to be closer to the music industry. Applying to school was a last-minute decision and something Saweetie didn't want to do because of her rap dreams, but her education has helped elevate her music career.


Saweetie's
Superfoods

“IT’S UNFORTUNATE THAT HAVING A PERSONALITY THAT’S ENGAGING, PEOPLE CAN OFTEN MISTAKE IT AS HAVING A LEVEL OF INTEREST BEYOND THE CONVERSATION.

BUT IF I WAS A MAN, YOU WOULDN’T HAVE TOOK IT THAT WAY.”

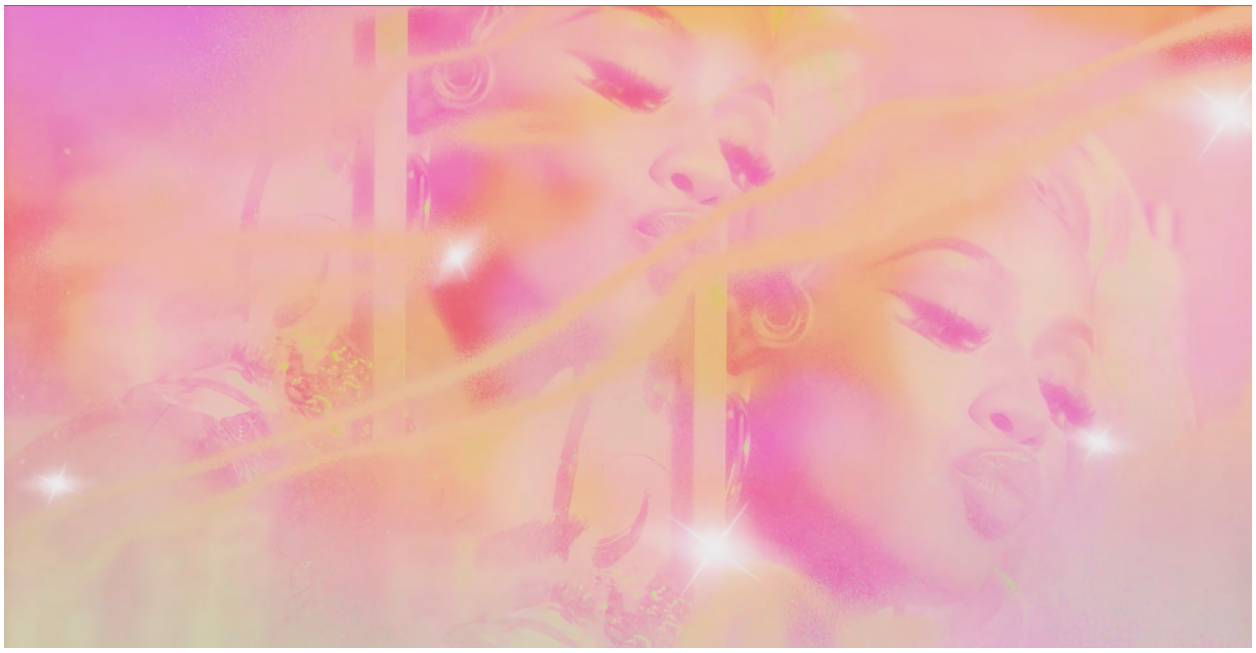
She had a full ride at USC thanks to grants and scholarships, but because the school increased tuition, she found side jobs to help pay the difference. One of those gigs was working as a waitress at a strip club. I ask Saweetie if she ever considered stripping: “No, because I was a good waitress. I made a lot of money,” she says, adding that she picked up valuable life lessons on the job. “I learned that time is money, and if you aren’t paying me for my time, I’m not serving you,” she says matter-of-factly. Another job was selling Money Makin Mamis merch, which was based on a doodle she drew of three girls during a night class at USC that she put on a T-shirt. “I’ve always just been a brander, or I’ve always been into aesthetics, not knowing that it was a brand or an aesthetic. But I was like, ‘OK, if I have these three girls on a T-shirt, they have to stand for something.’ And at the time, I was working three jobs. So I felt like there were other girls out in the world like me: who were going to school, who were paying their own bills, and had dreams.”

She dabbled in making music during college and posted clips of herself rapping in a car on IG because she couldn’t afford studio time. Those posts increased her IG following, but it wasn’t until after she graduated that she went all in on becoming a full-time artist. She got job offers to work on the administrative side at hospitals, but rejected them and gave herself a year to make it. She talks about receiving seedy offers from men in LA, which she doesn’t fully explain, that she says she turned down. “I think when you’re in LA and you're a woman and you’re in certain places at whatever time, people are really bold out here,” she says. “I was pointed to certain situations where I could have gotten money, but I declined it because I couldn’t jeopardize my integrity.”

Because Saweetie didn't go for any quick cash or demoralizing proposals and turned down job offers in the medical field, she was nowhere near icy when she wrote "Icy Girl." She composed it while sitting on a mattress without a bed frame in a bedroom she found on Craigslist, and the iciest piece of jewelry she owned at the time was a gold-plated nameplate necklace her stepmother gave her. She says she wasn't thinking about "Icy Girl" as a marketing device, although the phrase "Icy" is now an integral part of her brand. But she was always thinking about ways to push the song. Before she shot the viral video, she and Brazil got to work producing promotional material, like this clip art lyric video.

Saweetie met her former manager Max Gousse at a Puma x Fenty party in 2017. Gousse, who has worked with everyone from Beyoncé to YG, encouraged Saweetie to make a video for "Icy Girl," (it currently has 120 million views on YouTube) and four months after releasing it, Saweetie signed to Warner Records—she used her advance to pay off her student loans—and released "My Type," a flip of Petey Pablo's "Freek-A-Leek" that peaked at No. 21 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart in 2019. She went on to make another hit with "Best Friend," which featured Doja Cat, and peaked at No. 14 on the Billboard 100 earlier this year. Since then, she's been on a music-dropping spree, recently hopping on songs with pop acts like Gwen Stefani, Demi Lovato, and Little Mix, and co-signing younger artists via her *Pretty Summer Playlist* project, which showcases rising acts like her labelmate Loui, along with Kendra Jae, Lourdiz, Bbyafricka, and Drakeo the Ruler. Saweetie says these songs were originally just going to be loosie features, but she wanted to release them as a complete project, and has plans to continue doing a new one each summer. She's honing her sound and understands that being on a song with an artist like J. Cole, someone she once idolized and rapped for, wouldn't make sense sonically. When I ask her if she wants to work with him today, she says, "On production, yes."


Icy Grl
Nutrition Facts
Calories 190



Before the pandemic, Saweetie was poppin', but in a different way than she is now. She had hits that helped her book festivals and interviews, but most outlets reduced her brand down to a pretty girl with a large IG following who sampled songs from the 2000s and could kind of rap.

Saweetie, who spends a lot of time online, was fully aware of this narrative and the thinkpieces people wrote about her. But instead of getting on IG Live and wasting her energy arguing with y'all about why she wasn't that (my words, not hers), she used her platforms to showcase more of her personality. "I see *Icy University*, and my reality series, *Icy Life*, as a happy medium for me because I am able to control my narrative," she says. "And I think that's another reason why I decided to start showing my personality, because there was a lot of recurring and ongoing false narratives being said about me. The internet is a double-edged sword. It could be used for good, to break artists like myself. However, if you don't have a voice and if you don't speak up and create your own narrative, someone else will."

With *Icy University*, Saweetie is also attempting to help other artists present their own narratives. (She'll host a special *Icy University* Content Creator Masterclass during ComplexLand 2.0, happening June 16-18.) Saweetie comes across as tepid when we start to chat—she answers my initial questions as if she's being interviewed for a job. Over time she warms up, but she later admits that interviews scare her, which is why she wanted to ask guests her own questions on her own show. She says she wants to normalize giving regular interviews and humanizing artists. For example, Saweetie, a Jay-Z fan, (his songs play in the background on many of her early IG posts) says if he was on *Icy University*, she would ask him the following: How does he establish a strong network? How does he decompress from running a large company? How does he grow a company and not run it into the ground? And, what's his favorite food?

"When we go into interviews, I feel like we have to be on the defense a lot," she says. "You never know what the writer's going to do with your words. I can say one thing and that becomes a whole thinkpiece, and consumers don't realize that the media is propaganda. It's misconstrued at times and that really affects how people think about you in a negative way."

Saweetie says there's been times when she's had to assure her mom and dad that certain things they read about her are completely false. Just recently a nonsensical story came out stating that Saweetie paid NBA star James Harden $100k to date her. Harden said that was false. But I ask Saweetie would she ever pull a Beyoncé and stop doing press altogether? "Because I intend to continue business ventures like *Icy University*, which puts me in a position to socialize, I'm not sure I could. I could see why she doesn't and I feel her. Because, *girl*," she says, sounding exasperated.

Despite being afraid of interviews, Saweetie is really good at them. She's open and congenial without revealing a lot—much like her social content—and she's good at evading questions but responding in a way that makes you think she's answered your question. Did you see how she handled Justin LaBoy's question about threesomes?! *Chef's kiss*. Saweetie says she learned to communicate effectively from college, but also Dyana Williams, a Black radio legend who media-trained Saweetie and taught her how to be graceful. All of this comes through while filming *Icy University*. She's in the rare position of being the interviewer, and each of her guests that day are famous men—you will see who they are once *Icy University* drops this summer. But when she interviews them, she's present and intrigued. She leans in as they answer her questions, sometimes placing her chin in her palm and looking directly at them as they speak. She relays back their responses to show she fully comprehends what they just said. "Not only are you super talented, but that means you are noble and lovable," Saweetie says to one guest after he responds to her question. Saweetie and the men she's interviewing are nothing but professional, but I imagine there've been times when men perceived her natural curiosity as something it isn't.

At dinner I ask her if that's happened before and she nods her head. "And I think that just goes to my point of normalizing women networking with men. It's unfortunate that having a personality that's engaging, people can often mistake it as having a level of interest beyond the conversation. But if I was a man, you wouldn't have took it that way. But it just goes to show how much women have to think when they're trying to converse with someone who they're not interested in, but they're having to play this game. It's like having a conversation with the person in front of you and then a conversation in your head trying to make sure that I'm thinking about everything so that it's not taken as something else."

“IF YOU DON’T HAVE A VOICE AND IF YOU DON’T SPEAK UP AND CREATE YOUR OWN NARRATIVE, SOMEONE ELSE WILL.”

“I THINK THE REASON I HAVEN’T HAD A CHANCE TO DEVELOP IN A WAY THAT I WANTED TO IS BECAUSE I DO CONTENT. I AM A BUSINESSWOMAN, SO I TAKE A LOT OF MEETINGS.

SO I’M BEING STRETCHED IN SO MANY DIRECTIONS THAT IT DOESN’T ALLOW ME TO REALLY FOCUS ON MY ARTISTRY.”

During the pandemic, Saweetie changed management. Why? “I think as artists, we're all reptiles and it was time for me to shed my skin and create a new beginning and a new chapter for my life,” she says. She hired Louis K. Burrell, MC Hammer’s brother, who used to serve as his business manager. They are both Saweetie’s paternal uncles. Because of the pandemic and being unable to perform or release music, she wanted to stay connected with her fans, which is how the content came about. These content concepts weren’t completely new ideas, but with the extra time, she and Brazil were finally able to execute them.

The first intentional piece of content the pair made was a video of Saweetie pouring ramen into a bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos. It was narrated by a soundbite from xogabriellexo, which Brazil found on TikTok. “People think Saweetie does these concoctions for clickbait, but it’s not. This is how she eats,” says Brazil. They filmed it (Saweetie’s main cameraman, Brian “Spazz” Contreras, is with her all the time), worked with Sean Young and Moses Alexander, who edit all of Saweetie’s social content, and posted it. It went viral and currently has 19.5 million views on TikTok. Then came the *Friday* skit, where Saweetie played Craig, Smokey, and Felicia, mimicking each character with an uncanny accuracy. “That’s what set everything off,” Saweetie said during an interview for Complex’s video series *GOAT Talk*. The *Friday* skit, an idea she had for a while, was her favorite production, but Saweetie says she loves the Birkin Bag Bratz series, which turns her collection of very expensive handbags into talking characters with her eyes and lips. “One day, someone was like, ‘You treat them Birkins like it’s your kid.’ And I was like, ‘They are my kids,’ and that sparked the idea,” she says.

Saweetie and Brazil think about content on a daily basis. But for them, it’s not only about producing posts for social media. It’s also about staying ahead of the curve, hence collaborating with Oculus on Season 2 of *Icy University*. “Virtual reality might not pull people right now, but five or 10 years from now, I’m sure the world will be accustomed to 3D screens,” says Brazil. “So for us, it’s about being at the front of the pack and thinking about what’s trendy, because trends die quick. You have to hit the head on the needle every single time, and we damn near do that.” Next up for the team is gaming. Saweetie is launching her Twitch channel

this month and partnering with gaming collective Gen.G to host a workshop series in support of AAPI entrepreneurs.

What Saweetie does online via her content is a lesson in how to bottle up and sell a persona in a way that doesn't feel fake or thirsty. She's not the only celebrity making content. We've seen actors like Will Smith remain relevant with their IG pages, or artists like DJ Khaled gain a massive reach with off-the-cuff Snapchat videos. But Saweetie is one of the few rappers using the platforms in a strategic, highly marketable way. She's pulling from her own experiences and turning them into original, bite-size forms of entertainment. And if you are Black, it all feels very familiar. It's why the videos of her doing her baby hairs or dancing in Gucci socks and sandals while drinking directly out of the Minute Maid juice carton receive almost 3 million views. By the way, with the exception of her manager, Saweetie's core team is made up of all Black women, and if you work in media and deal with Black talent and their teams, you'll know that this is a rarity.

Saweetie and Brazil are well-versed in the internet and tap into already-trending memes, like the time Saweetie became the real-life version of the stepping into a new year graphic, or when she posted her own take on the "Beat Box" June Bug challenge. Saweetie is a natural-born entertainer who comes across as very relatable despite being very attractive—she has a smooth, heart-shaped doll face with high cheekbones and plump lips and, yes, she's pretty in real life despite what men who could be her father have presumed. And while it doesn't feel like she's selling us anything, 90 percent of her content features her merch and her music. "This content brings more viewers and more people who just like her as a person, and that turns into streams at the end of the day," says Brazil. All of this is a tricky balance that even the most seasoned celebs haven't mastered, but Saweetie has.

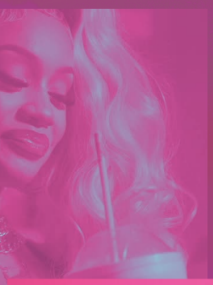
Saweetie invests a lot of time and energy in her content, but she's also serious about her music. *Pretty Bitch Music*, which she began working on pre-pandemic, is her debut album that's set to drop this summer. She was inspired by the way Tupac turned the "thug" in Thug Life into an acronym, and applied that to the "bitch" in *Pretty Bitch Music*: "B" stands for bossed up or bossy, "I" for independent, "T" for toughness, "C" for creative, and "H" for hyphy (a nod to her roots in the Bay). Saweetie makes fun, upbeat bops with catchy hooks that do well on streaming platforms, but despite that, she feels like she has something to prove as an artist, which might explain why the album has taken so long to drop. She wants to show her skills as a writer and songmaker.

"I've always been a writer," she says. "When I was young, I assumed everyone wrote their raps." But Saweetie admits that during an earlier part of her career, she was overworked and not feeling creative. Over quarantine, though, things changed and she spent more time rapping, making songs, and experimenting with singing. "When I began to be overworked, my spirit of creativity died, but now I feel like, in quarantine, I was able to recharge. Now I'm passionate, and I feel like I have a clear vision of what I want to do."

Pretty Bitch Music will include previously released singles like "Back to the Streets" with Jhené Aiko and "Best Friend." Saweetie doesn't offer many details on the album, but she believes she's taking things to the next level as an artist with her writing and the production. But she still plans on utilizing samples. Her recently released single "Fast (Motion)" samples Oakland artist Kafani's "Fast Like a Nascar" featuring Keak Da Sneak. She previewed a song, "I Love a Thug," on IG Live earlier this month, which might or might not make the album, but it sounded on brand. It was a simple beat with heavy bass and hi-hats and a hook that's easy to recite (or yell) while dancing in the club or commuting to work. Saweetie went on to say that *Pretty Bitch Music* is almost done, she's just deciding on features, but we can expect "slaps on slaps."

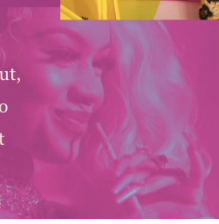
Saweetie's progressed as an artist but she knows there's room for growth. This past April, she joined a bootcamp for artist development to improve her performances, where she worked on things she struggles with, including breath control, choreography, details, and stamina. She enrolled in the program shortly after a performance with Doja Cat on Triller Fight Club that people criticized. The performance was mired by production problems beyond her control, but Saweetie looked a little vacant onstage and seemed uncomfortable with the choreography. On an IG Live after the performance, someone commented on her twerking skills; she replied, "You right, my booty don't shake like that. I'm an athlete."


CANDY APPLE WHIP
AIN'T STARVE WIT ME
THICK & RICH
HOT ASS

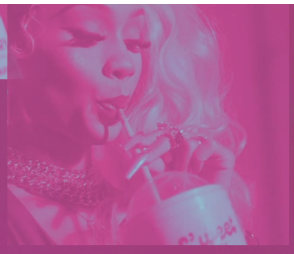


"For me, honestly, just my performance," she says now about how she wants to get better as an artist. Saweetie believes that in order to avoid plateauing as a performer, she needs to provide choreography and big moments while on stage. "I think the reason I haven't had a chance to develop in a way that I wanted to is because I do content. I am a businesswoman, so I take a lot of meetings. I like to be hands-on with everything. So I'm being stretched in so many directions that it doesn't allow me to really focus on my artistry." She adds, "I think that my music, especially for *Pretty Bitch Music*, deserves a level of discipline from me so that when I perform these songs, my level of performance matches the presence of my music."

The other downside to being the Queen of Content is Saweetie doesn't get much rest. She blocks off her schedule for what she refers to as "content days," and she's clearly tired. When we meet for dinner at Katana in West Hollywood, which was pushed back a day because she needed a break, her publicist greets her and asks her how she is. "Not good," she quickly responds. She's coming straight from a day-long photo shoot for her collaboration with Kiss Colors Edge Fixer Glued. She's not in full glam, but she still looks famous. She's wearing black Gucci sunglasses with big, square-ish frames and a black tracksuit, black furry slides, and most of her fingers are covered with at least one chunky diamond or platinum ring, which I notice every time she moves her long blond extensions out of the way to properly eat. (She ordered miso soup, garlic lobster noodles, green tea with lots of lemon, popcorn shrimp fried extra crispy with white rice on the side, and octopus sushi.) I ask her how she decompresses and takes care of herself mentally. "I don't," she says. "Every four to five months, I cancel my whole day. So it's not like I decompress, but I need to get better about it."



It's also probably hard to relax, relate, and release when people watch your every move and notice things most of us don't have to worry about, like when she unfollowed her ex-boyfriend Quavo on IG, forcing her to address the breakup. What followed was a piece of content that wasn't carefully created or curated by Saweetie. In late March, TMZ released video footage of an altercation she had with Quavo in an elevator. She contained the situation with a straight and to-the-point statement, which she shared on social media, that quelled much of the chatter: "This unfortunate incident happened a year ago, while we have reconciled since then and moved past this particular disagreement, there were simply too many other hurdles to overcome in our relationship and we have both since moved on."

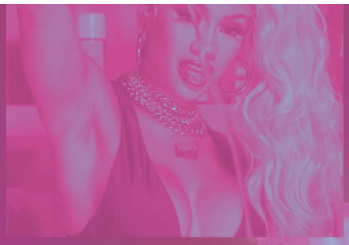


A lot of media outlets have centered her relationship with Quavo and the elevator incident as if it's the most relevant thing about her, so she doesn't want to address him or the relationship. But because I know some of y'all are only here for the "tea," I ask her some generalized questions about relationships that *could* apply to Quavo.

What do you do when you are trying to get over your ex but you can't block him entirely because he goes to the same school as you? Sidenote: When I asked her this, it was only a couple of days after the 2021 Billboard Music Awards, where Saweetie was nominated for Top Rap Female Artist, and both she and Quavo attended. Saweetie laughs. "You know what, that's really funny, because I never talked to anyone in college. I was that girl at school that nobody could touch because I was always dating someone outside of college. That's an interesting question." Then she asks me, "What would you do?" I tell her I would probably just smile and go about my business, and she continues to ponder the question, not connecting it in any way to Quavo, or maybe she has but just doesn't want to verbalize it. "I always wonder how that experience would have been. I saw my homegirls do it and it would look fun, but when that shit went bad, it went *bad*," she says.

I then ask her if you should give back gifts your ex gave you after you break up. I already know the answer to this question, because the mint-green Birkin bag Quavo bought her is sitting between us, but she looks at me, pauses for a beat, smirks and says, "I mean... If it's mine, it's mine."

Saweetie knows her worth in relationships. She's the same woman who said if he's not buying you a Birkin, throw him back to the streets, which elicited lots of commentary from men who aren't even close to the periphery of Saweetie's league. She says she was being facetious in the video (Quavo is in the background) and promoting her new song, but she does consider herself high value and applies that to her business partnerships as well, which Saweetie says currently bring in the most revenue. Over the past few years, Saweetie has worked with the following companies: Quay; PrettyLittleThing; Triller; Brandon Blackwood; Matte Swimwear; High Hemp; Kiss Colors Edge Fixer Glued gel; Activision; Morphe; Jack Daniel's; Mielle Hair Care; Frank Body; Sinful Colors; Postmates and Blaze Pizza; Xbox; Cheetos; Bud Light Seltzer; Coca-Cola Energy; Ciroc; American Express; Beats; Yummy Hair Extensions; and Fashion Nova. On paper, her collabs seem all over the place, but they speak to Saweetie's broad appeal. Saweetie says before agreeing to work with a brand, she asks herself: Would she wear it? Would she use it? Does she like it? "If the answer is yes to those three questions, then I'm ready to go," she says. She's down for whatever makes sense and aligns, saying consumers aren't dumb, but there's one brand that she really wants to partner with that she hasn't yet, and that's Nerf, which manufactures toy guns that shoot foam darts. "I have Nerf guns on my rider," she says. Riders are a list of things that celebs request to be in their green rooms during photo shoots and performances. They usually include food and toiletries. A Nerf gun is very unexpected for a rider, but Saweetie says she likes to have fun during her down time. And a week or so after we chat, she posts a video of her team and herself playing with Nerf guns on IG TV. I assume an official partnership isn't far off.



She's discovering how much of a package deal she is for brands, and says she plans on charging companies more; a fee for for the partnership and a separate fee for the content she creates. "Creatives need to get paid," she says. And it makes sense. Saweetie and her team don't just attach their name to these companies. They serve as sort of an ad agency, coming up with ways to connect her authentically to the product and then sell it to her large following. For example, while working with Quay, the Australian sunglasses brand, Saweetie not only created a collaborative collection, she came up with content for TikTok and IG to help teach the American market how to pronounce the brand's name (something artists typically do without getting paid), wore the sunglasses in her "Fast (Motion)" video, and, following the song's release, posted a custom "Fast (Motion)" Quay verse made specifically for TikTok that encouraged viewers to rap along with her in the #SayQuaynotKway challenge. According to Quay, that hashtag generated over 6 billion views on TikTok and several styles from her collection sold out the same day. "There's a certain levity to what she does that makes her feel approachable, authentic, and highly watchable," says Jodi Bricker, CEO of Quay. "We have a young, diverse customer base that relates to her multicultural background and most importantly how she authentically shows up and connects with her audience."

Simone Banna, an independent strategic consultant, believes Saweetie has the potential to build a billion-dollar empire. So much so that she posted a thread on Twitter outlining how Saweetie could leverage her strong personal brand to do just that. Banna believes that because of her massive following and engagement, Saweetie no longer needs to do endorsement or licensing deals with brands like PrettyLittleThing. "The way Saweetie becomes a billionaire: going DIRECT TO AUDIENCE," Banna tweeted, going on to suggest different beauty businesses Saweetie could take on to get herself to that billion-dollar figure. Banna gave away this consulting because she's trying to promote her expertise, but she also thinks Black female entertainers, outside of Rihanna, are leaving money on the table by going through middlemen like Fashion Nova and PrettyLittleThing, where they usually have no equity.

"The point is to show my followers and people on Twitter that Black women can exist in industries outside of creating content and doing brand partnerships," Banna says. "We do have the buying power to have ownership and equity over what we are building. Equity is the buzz word people throw around, but the only way we can have equity is to own something or be a very early investor in something."

Saweetie already sells directly to consumers via her merch, but she says after her first album, she wants to focus on her own beauty and fashion line. Right now, though, because it needs to be perfect, she's dedicating her time to music and brand partnerships. She plans on pursuing public and private ventures, including a restaurant. "I want to put all of my favorite foods in one restaurant, but with a twist," she says. But she's still considering whether she should let the public know she's behind it when it does open. She's also thinking about the financial benefits of being an independent artist. It was a topic that comes up often during her *Icy University* interviews. She talks to one *Icy University* guest candidly about feeling a way when she looks over her earnings and sees how much goes to the label. "I think after my label run, that's something I would consider. But I know independent artists have to work a lot harder," she says, sitting across from her label's publicist.

There's a long history of Black artists, particularly Black female artists, not getting what they are owed. There's also a long history of our likeness being used in a way that's profitable for everyone but us. Just peruse TikTok or IG and you will come across influencers who get their following by watering down dances they didn't come up with to songs they didn't make. You might be surprised to know that some of the most prominent TikTok stars who do exactly what I just described have much larger followings than Saweetie, the creator. But then I look at Saweetie sitting diagonally across from me, with her plump, shiny lips that she often presses together to make sure they are always properly glossed, long nails decorated with crystals, blond baby hairs, and big hoop earrings (Black girl staples that have been derided as "ghetto" but are now on trend) and I feel low-key proud. Not only did she make her rap dreams come true with chart-topping hits, she has monetized her likeness in a way that feels like a small sliver of redemption. And she's done it on her own terms.

"I think it's really important for a woman to know what she wants," says Saweetie. "Otherwise, and I don't know why it is, but people try to control women and everything that comes with them, especially if they're a strong woman."

Dinner is over and I walk down to the valet with Saweetie, her publicist, assistant, and cameraman. She tells me she's exhausted, so she's blocked out a day to do nothing after a jam-packed week of being booked and busy. As a driver pulls up in a black SUV, she wishes me a safe flight back. She hops in the truck and is whisked away to what I presume is her modern home in the Hollywood Hills, the one that was on her vision board. The one she and Brazil used to hop fences to take pictures in front of. And a voice in my head can't help but scream, "I know that's right!"